A Small but Stubborn Fire

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/52895497.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/M, Gen
Fandom:	Miraculous Ladybug
Relationships:	Sabine Cheng & Marinette Dupain-Cheng	Ladybug, Sabine Cheng/Tom Dupain, Sabine Cheng & Wang Cheng, Sabine Cheng & Sabine's Mother
Characters:	Sabine Cheng, Marinette Dupain-Cheng	Ladybug, Tom Dupain, Adrien Agreste	Chat Noir, Sabine Cheng's Mother, Nathalie Sancoeur, Alya Césaire, Sabine Cheng's Sister, Wang Cheng (Miraculous Ladybug), Master Fu (Miraculous Ladybug), Tikki (Miraculous Ladybug), Rolland Dupain, Gina Dupain, Mullo (Miraculous Ladybug)
Additional Tags:	Minor Adrien Agreste	Chat Noir/Marinette Dupain-Cheng	Ladybug, Marinette Dupain-Cheng	Ladybug Identity Reveal, Identity Reveal, Panic Attacks, Nightmares, Kung Fu, Martial Arts, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff, Mother-Daughter Relationship, Good Parent Nathalie Sancoeur, Original Akuma (Miraculous Ladybug), Guardian of the Miraculous Marinette Dupain-Cheng	Ladybug, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Trauma, Badass Sabine Cheng, Chinese Language, Biracial Character
Language:	English
Collections:	Miraculous Ladybug Big Bang 2023
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-08 Updated: 2024-03-01 Words: 28,468 Chapters: 8/19

A Small but Stubborn Fire

by KPG

Summary

What if you were the parent of a teenage superhero, but didn't know they were? All you know is the nightmares, the panic attacks, and the bruises. She's missing school, she's disappearing on you, and she's not telling you anything.

So you assume the worst: Assault. Depression. A permanent rift in the family.

And what do you do when you realize you weren't thinking dark enough? Because your fourteen-year old daughter is the hero who flirts with death on the nightly news.

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Come inside and read about one mother's struggles to raise her daughter in a dangerous world while avoiding the mistakes her own mother made with her.

Notes

Welcome to my Big Bang fic for 2023!

Before we begin, I want to briefly acknowledge the people who helped me out.

First, I may be the parent of this story, but UpTooLateArt is the midwife. Alpha and beta reader, might as well be the Alpha and the Omega. She has a new Miraculous Big Bang fic out, too. It's an Aladdin AU, A Whole New World!

Second, RaspberryCatapult has been like a sister cheering me on carrying this baby to term, reading snippets, and being a beta reader down the stretch. She has a BB fic coming out soon, too! I can't wait!

Two artists who are part of the team are Naz Artz and Izanogi. Their work comes later in the story! And finally, three others who helped out with reading or ideas: WeHadABondingMoment, Mystic_Raven20, and bohemianrhapsody711.

Think of this as vaguely set in S4, some time after Qilin. But everyone still says "Hawkmoth."

And finally, Ao3 user Emilieee did a great writeup a few years ago proposing that Marinette should have a Chinese name, Meiyun. I've always loved this, and adopted it for my fic.

Update: I realized if I'm to be gifting to people who don't know me, I should put a note up top that it's because a reader wanted to acknowledge you. Read the endnotes for more info!

cardiac-agreste

The Nightmare

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"NO, GET AWAY FROM ME!"

Sabine felt the shove toward consciousness as her eyes snapped open.

Marinette.

"Don't touch me! I'm begging you!"

Her daughter's pleas and screams rained down from the room above, scraping the unconsciousness from her brain as she flipped the duvet off her body.

"No! NOT THERE!!!!"

She threw herself out of bed, her body running on instinct, before she'd even processed what must be happening. Her knees thudded on the floor, her sense of balance chasing after her body—and gaining. She had to get upstairs!

"Tom! Tom! It's Marinette! I think someone's got to her room!" Her voice trailed off, growing breathy as she flung herself onto her feet and sprinted for the door.

On the way out, she reached into her open gym bag and grabbed her tai chi sword, out of breath with fear before she'd even escaped the bedroom. She slammed into the jamb of the door and felt pain radiate from her shoulder, but it didn't slow her down.

Faster! Faster!

Her heart was in her throat, cold sweat already forming under her nightgown. Legs on fire, she leapt up the stairs three at a time.

One floor.

Two floors.

Marinette!

"GET AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!" Sabine screamed as she slammed the trap door open, erupting up into Marinette's bedroom. She flipped on the light, launching herself toward the loft bed like lava cast out of a volcano.

Her body flared with madness. Sword cocked back, grain of the wooden handle like sandpaper in her grip, she surged up the ladder, her mind rifling through long-forgotten anatomy lessons for veins to stab, and—

She stopped in her tracks as she got to the top.

Relief.

Confusion.

She perched with one hand wringing the top rung of the ladder, peering around to see if someone had disappeared into the shadows.

There's no one here. She's alone.

Her daughter was sitting bolt up with her hair a mess, a dandelion after a strong wind, tears sliding down her cheeks.

Naturally, she heard Tom before she saw him. He was like a storm rolling in over Hangzhou Bay—thunder, and thunder, and thunder, until an assault of lightning.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" He flew in, and she could swear she saw electricity bristling off his forearms.

Marinette's eyes, blown wide, were like fish bowls filled to the brim with terror. Her irises drifted toward Sabine, and then to Tom. For a moment, Sabine saw Marinette in there, surfacing into the remnants of the storm that she and Tom had brought with them.

"*Maman*…what are you…" Marinette lost control of her own breathing and went limp.

"*Meiyun*!" Sabine finished climbing the ladder and crawled to her daughter's side to make sure she hadn't hurt herself. She hauled Marinette into her lap, gasping at her daughter's tremors as she lay unconscious, the teaspoon cuddling the tablespoon.

Marinette croaked every time she inhaled, and when she exhaled, her lungs rattled like death.

What's wrong with her breathing?

Sabine held her close and began rocking to soothe her. "Shhhhh, shhhhh, it's OK. You're OK. It was just a bad dream. Shhhhhhhh." It was easier than expected to move her daughter around.

Is she losing weight?

She continued rocking her.

A question for tomorrow.

She turned her so she could hold her head to the crook of her neck, like she'd done so many times to comfort her plum blossom. She stroked her hair, matted to her forehead by cold sweat. "Shhhhh, baby, shhhhhhhhhhhh. We're here. We've got you. We won't let anyone hurt you."

Tom climbed the ladder to join them, the bed creaking nearly as loud as the blood rushing past Sabine's eardrums as he shifted his weight across the mattress. He nuzzled Marinette's hand to his cheek, giving her his warmth. His eyes scanned the room, lingering on various landmarks: a safety-pinned bodice draped on her dress form; her chaise with sketch supplies spread out; a tiny pillow it seemed she'd fallen asleep knitting…

He took a deep breath and tilted his head up, like he was checking if someone had entered from the rooftop access panel but was afraid of what he'd find. Then his eyes narrowed in confusion, blowing out wider than Sabine had ever seen them.

Her heart stopped.

What did he find?

She looked up to see what had struck Tom dumb.

A sketch?

There, pinned to the hatch where her daughter would see it every time she went to get some fresh air, was a drawing of a man in a white outfit and domino mask grinning back, looking ready to devour her flesh. Behind him, the moon was split in two. And there were words scrawled, representing an idea she'd never imagined her joyful, romantic daughter could ever consider.

"Love destroys."

Oh no.

Sabine refused to hand her over to Tom—"No men should touch her right now," she warned him—so he went down the stairs first to guide Sabine as she negotiated the awkward steps.

Clutching Sabine's neck, Marinette kept her nose buried in her hair while Sabine swayed, trudging back to the master bedroom. She could feel her daughter's breath on her neck, still elevated, irregular, and raspy.

With Tom looking on, Sabine laid Marinette down in their bed.

"We'll be right here watching over you, sweetie." Sabine swept Marinette's hair off her sweaty forehead and, though her daughter was now fourteen years old, she sang her a lullaby Uncle had sung to her.

♬处处闻啼鸟，夜来风雨声♬

Sabine rocked back from the bed and sat down beside Tom on their bedroom sofa. Her pulse crashed against her skull like a captive child thumping at its prison.

Tom moved closer, and they held each other's hands. Where their fingertips touched, her skin throbbed as their heartbeats spoke in code. Every time Marinette exhaled, they held their own breaths, and Sabine silently implored her to take another.

Eventually, Marinette's breathing came back under control. Only then did a terrified mother allow her own heart to do the same.

Chapter End Notes

So there's chapter one, and it is by far the shortest chapter!

This story is finished, and it is twelve chapters long. However, I'm expecting to split a few long ones up because I personally prefer 2500–3500 word chapters. I'm going to release one chapter a week, and hopefully y'all appreciate it as much as I appreciate you!

About a year ago, my 6yo was struggling to breathe at night. My wife rushed her to the ER while I stayed at home to watch over our sleeping 3yo. I'll never forget the *sounds*, the fear, and the all-consuming dread that followed until I got an update from my wife that everything was okay.

In the spring, I was watching MLB with my kids and realized that Sabine is probably seeing a lot of bad changes in Marinette, but she has no idea what's going on! I put these two things together, and here we are.

Another order of business: I love giving presents. Every fic I've written on AO3 so far, I've gifted to someone. Now I want to do something unusual. Maybe it's cringe, I dunno, but **if you are a mother, or you know someone on AO3 who is one** (and doesn't mind AO3 strangers knowing it), and you want this story to be a gift to yourself or them, drop a comment or find me on Tumblr at @cardiac-agreste, and I'll add people until AO3 doesn't let me add any more gift recipients. This story is for all of you doing the hard and underappreciated work of raising past, present, and future heroes.

If you want your name removed later, let me know.

Translation note: Sabine is not actually singing a lullaby, but a very old poem instead!

She sings *Chù chù wén tí niǎo. Yè lái fēng yǔ shēng*. It's from the poem Spring Morning, and this particular bit is about the birds chirping the morning after a nighttime rainstorm.

Finally, if you have constructive criticism, I'm all for it. (gulps)

The Next Morning

Chapter Summary

As she reviewed the advance orders they had to contend with, the memory of last night gnawed at her like a rat in the walls, chewing through the wiring, threatening to burn the house down. She let her notes drop to the countertop and she leaned on her hands. But the countertops were bright white, which reminded her of the sketch, so she spun around, putting that memory behind her for the moment.

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Tom and Sabine discuss Marinette's nightmare, and then Sabine has a heart-to-heart with her daughter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sabine woke early the next morning from her awkward position on the loveseat in her bedroom. She was alone, meaning Tom was already downstairs working. She wiped the sleep out of her eyes and looked at her bed.

Thank goodness, Marinette's still asleep.

She hadn't heard anything else at night, and with Marinette right there in the same room, that meant there must not have been any more nightmares.

Good thing it's Sunday. She can sleep in.

She quietly stood up and stretched, feeling her vertebrae crack one at a time. She bent to the left and right to stretch out her hips. It wasn't fun getting older, but when she glanced over at her daughter, smiling in her sleep…she'd take all the little aches and pains if it meant she had Marinette safe at home.

She would rather be tending to her croissant than selling them, but customers didn't care about nightmares, and she had a business to run. She rushed through her morning routine as quiet as a mouse and snuck out of her room so as not to wake her daughter.

Freshened up, she arrived down in the bakery. Her husband was at the ovens, pulling out fresh boules of French bread to put on display. She ambled over and hugged him from behind, nuzzling the small of his back and drawing in his musky scent.

"Well!" Tom turned around in her embrace so he was facing her, bent over with his mouth to her ear. "Good morning to you, too, my poolish!" She could hear the grin in his voice. It sent a shiver down her spine, and the jerk knew it!

"Good morning, my big-a boy," she whispered.

The first time they had ever made love, Tom had given her that nickname as they lay in bed after.

"Why poolish, Tom?"

His post-coital voice husky, he stared deep in her eyes, slid one of his large fingers softly along her ribs, and said, "Because it's wet! spongy! and the start of something that tastes amazing!" He wiggled his eyebrows seductively at her and began tickling her ribs.

Sabine thrashed around, giggling and kicking her legs, but she narrowed her eyes at him, trying to look intimidating. No such luck when your boyfriend towered over you!

Tom guffawed, and she slapped him firmly on the shoulder, but with all the love at her disposal. Tom loved puns, so she wasn't actually upset. And boys in France were so much more open about blue humor than back in China—especially the boys she was allowed *to know. It was one of the things that made being with Tom feel so liberating: she could say what she thought without worrying about saving face. It wasn't like back home with her mom.*

Tom was freedom and safety.

So, not to be outdone, she gave him his own nickname.

They fell into a comfortable silence as they broke the hug to prepare to open the bakery. Sabine pulled money from the safe and restocked the till, while Tom finished loading the first batch of croissants and pain au chocolat on display.

As she reviewed the advance orders they had to contend with, the memory of last night gnawed at her like a rat in the walls, chewing through the wiring, threatening to burn the house down. She let her notes drop to the countertop and she leaned on her hands. But the countertops were bright white, which reminded her of the sketch, so she spun around, putting that memory behind her for the moment.

"Tom…about last night. That wasn't any normal nightmare. Marinette was terrified when I got there. I could practically smell it."

Her husband set a jar of baking powder aside and looked at her. She felt guilty that she'd managed to fall asleep last night because, from the way his eyelids sagged like an old archway, she knew he hadn't slept at all.

She continued, feeling a chill in her spine as she recalled making eye contact with her daughter on the loft. "When she looked at me, it was as if she wasn't even present, like staring at a blank sheet of paper. And she felt so thin! It doesn't make sense! She always seems so happy. Do you... Could she be depressed?"

He shifted display items back and forth, arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. "I don't know. When I got up there, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. She looked so *small*. So *defeated*. But why? It didn't look like anyone else had been there. In fact, the only strange thing I noticed was—"

"—that sketch. Of the man in the white suit, and 'love destroys.' What was that?"

Tom paused and sniffled. "I've been wondering that myself."

“She’s always been a romantic. She’s never talked like that before. She’s always going on about Adrien, and now she has that internship at his father’s company. They see each other more often, and she’s got something to be really proud of. She should feel more like his equal now. I can see Adrien has feelings for her, so, if anything, the situation should be looking up for her! But instead she draws that horrifying man in wh…ite…”

No.

She brought a hand to her mouth and began nibbling on a fingernail. She was vaguely aware of her eyes unfocusing as a host of horribles paraded through her imagination. She heard a soft hissing in the room and realized it was her own breath through her teeth.

Tom was fixated on her, eyebrows furrowed. “What’s on your mind, Sabine?”

“You don’t think...no, it can’t be....”

“What is it?”

“Do you think...maybe something happened with Gabriel Agreste? She’s shadowing him and Mlle Sancoeur. And he’s always wearing that white suit now, like in the sketch! Could he have...she’s idolized him for so long...and now she’s with him everywhere, probably alone in his office with him sometimes…and she couldn’t fight off a determined adult. And the few times I’ve talked to him, it’s like his voice can hypnotize you into doing anything.”

“Sabine—“

“’*Love Destroys.*’ That’s what she wrote, Tom. She’s finally in her element around Adrien, doing what she does best, so why *that*? Why *now*? If Gabriel took advantage of her, it would explain...Tom, she was yelling, ‘Get away from me!’ when I woke up last night. And for her to start thinking of love as destructive...”

Tom crossed to her and put his hands on her shoulders, likely to reassure her. “We don’t know what that sketch means. Maybe Jagged recommended her to someone and she’s doing another album cover, or some kind of production design. I heard her talking to someone yesterday on the phone in her room about a tiki something. Is he doing a show in Hawaii? It could be anything.”

“Well, we can’t do *nothing*! If it happened once, it might happen again! I don’t want her to get hurt, Tom. We *need* to figure this out!” She shrugged his hands off and shook her arms in frustration.

Tom nodded and stepped back, giving her space. “Okay. Maybe you should talk to her. Some kind of pretext. See what she thinks about the internship so far.”

“…alright. That’s a good idea. I’ll try. But Tom, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

The bell above the door rang, and Sabine painted a broad grin on her face. She turned to the door.

“Good morning, Mme Fournier!”

A few hours later, Sabine turned at the sound of footsteps bounding down the stairs into the bakery. “Good morning, *Maman*!” Marinette chirped, and she moved to kiss her on the cheek before she

stumbled, nearly falling on top of Sabine, who easily caught her. Like she'd always catch her.

"Good morning, sweetie."

Tom chuckled at the sight of his daughter being caught by his tiny wife. "Good morning, Marinette! Are you ready for your papa's world-famous breakfast?"

"Yes! I'm so hungry today!"

"OK, go to the kitchen with your mom and let me serve you two. Today's been a bit slow, so I don't have to rush to make anything. I've got some time to watch the shop while I take care of the royalty living here!"

"OK, Papa!" Marinette gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and skipped back upstairs to the family kitchen. Tom gave Sabine a nod.

She took her time heading upstairs into the kitchen behind her daughter, and she joined her at the table, standing beside her daughter for a moment. Sabine slid her hands along the table, feeling the wood grain along her fingertips, and took a deep breath to draw strength.

"No, Sabina, don't take the painting in yet!" Gina fussed and flitted around the moving van like a ladybug. "In France, the table is the first thing to move into a home. Moving the dinner table into a home first will fill it with good fortune! Then you can take in whatever you want. But: table first. Tom! Get your lazy butt over here and help me!" Gina laughed as she saw her son trundling over, balancing four chairs at once."

"Sorry, Mamma!" Tom giggled as he set down his load.

"Oh, new neighbors!" said an elderly Chinese man, approaching the bakery entrance. "I'm Fu Wang, I have a massage parlor and Chinese medicine shop a few blocks away."

*Sabine waved, excited to be meeting another Chinese immigrant in the area. "*噢，很高興認識您，王先生！我叫郑夏冰。*But here people call me Sabine."*

Gina continued berating Tom as the two of them made their way to the van's back door. "You've got your pregnant wife here—who's never moved into a new house before—and she's not accustomed to silly French superstitions yet. And you've got her carrying things in!"

"Okay, okay, I understand, jeez." Tom picked up the table and maneuvered it inside by himself.

"Did I hear your...mother in law? Did she say you're pregnant?" asked Fu.

"Yes!" She placed her hand on her stomach, just giddy from thinking about the bun in her oven. Oh no, Tom's jokes were rubbing off on her!

*He smiled wide, with a glint in his eye. "*恭喜有喜了*Sabine! It makes me smile to see a young family move into the neighborhood. We're all so stodgy over here, like a bunch of turtles. You'll inject some fun into the neighborhood." The man peered beyond her and laughed. "And look at your husband managing that large table all by himself! First thing in the house—it's auspicious."*

The man seemed to be listening to a hidden voice, or feeling a change in the wind she didn't. He pulled his jacket collar a bit tighter and nodded at her. "I'll say a prayer at the temple that your child be lucky in life! If you ever need anything, swing by. I've been in Paris a mighty long time, and I remember what it was like the first few years as an immigrant."

"Thank you, Mr Wang. Have a nice day!" Sabine waved, then turned and marched into the bakery, pausing at the threshold to take a deep breath. She stepped in, followed the sound of Tom's clomping upstairs to the kitchen, and imagined her future self sitting at the table having breakfast with her daughter.

But this wasn't the future she'd imagined.

Sabine almost missed as she snatched the back of a chair to pull it out to sit down—she wasn't sure she'd be able to stand for this conversation. Her legs were already feeling weak from anticipation. She needed to clear her mind, so, as she slid herself and the chair closer to the table, she squeezed the seat on either side of her hips.

Her imagination was torturing her, and she clicked her teeth together. She rubbed at her swiftly-warming eyes—"wow, I still have some sleep to wash off my face!" she excused—and fixed them on her daughter. She took a deep breath and steadied her voice as well as she could. "*Baobei*, about last night..."

Marinette considered her mother for a moment before she waved off the implied question. "It was just a bad dream, *Maman*! Nothing to worry about!"

Sabine clicked her tongue. "It seemed more than 'bad,' honey. What even was that?"

"Oh, nothing! I was a fairy tale princess and, uh, a wolf was coming after me!" Marinette explained.

"A big, bad wolf?" This sounded like an improvisation. "Did he blow your house down?"

Her daughter looked down at the swirling patterns on the table. "Basically."

This took her by surprise, and she reached her hands over to her daughter's. "Oh, my poor Red Riding Hood…"

Marinette pursed her lips, as if she were holding a secret at bay.

"You mean the three little pigs."

"What?"

"The wolf blew the *pigs'* houses down. Red Riding Hood was a different wolf. He ate her grandma."

She'd never keep the Western fairy tales straight. Really, if Tom hadn't been so present as a father, Marinette probably wouldn't know any of those stories. *Cendrillon*, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White…Sabine had never been a fan of the weak girls in those tales.

Snow White...

Another intrusive thought about the sketch.

Marinette played with the napkin where she sat. “This was more like Liu Yi, and the dragon princess he found all alone, abused and discarded…”

She felt her throat constrict. “So there was a wolf chasing you, but also you were all alone and someone saved you? And you were…abused?”

“No, I…he was chasing me, and then I saved him from himself.”

Sabine fought the urge to press her harder. This didn’t make sense. Marinette had been terrified and screaming, but she was the hero in the story?

She wanted to ask why she thought being a hero would be so traumatic. But if she tried to force things out of Marinette, her daughter might clam up for good on this subject.

Daughters don’t tell their mothers everything. Certainly, her own mother had been so insistent about her “no boys” policy while Sabine studied in France that she hadn’t breathed a word about Tom until it was too late. Although Uncle must have known and kept quiet.

So she nodded and smiled. “OK, sweetie.” The Cheng family was filled with renowned financiers, and in a manner of speaking, Sabine was the same. It took nerves of steel, and shuttering one’s heart to listen to the mind. She invested in a future truth by buying the current lie.

She heard footsteps approach and let the conversation lull for a moment. *Tom*.

“Here you two lovely ladies go! Pain aux raisins, brioche, and marmalade. Aaaand here’s some tea. Enjoy!” With that, Tom left again.

Sabine took a sip of her tea and leveled her gaze at Marinette. “So...you and Adrien seem to be getting closer...”

Marinette nearly spat out her tea. “Well, I *am* at his father’s company every day after school now. *Obviously* we’d be around each other more, and he *did* ask Nathalie if I could shadow her at work, so I guess he thinks we’re close, too.” She paused, catching her breath after all those words and put on a faint smile. “Though that’s the kind of thing Adrien would do for anyone.” Sabine recognized a fake smile when she saw one. It didn’t sound like her daughter was praising Adrien’s selflessness; it sounded more as if she were trying to remind herself that she wasn’t special.

“What I mean is, you seem so much more confident around him lately. You still have that crush on him, right?”

Her daughter blushed, but frowned, and Sabine worried that might be a hint as to the truth.

Adrien?

But it couldn’t be; the boy was like a government building in Macau, green flags everywhere.

“Marinette, I know you *tried* to give up on him in the past…but if he didn’t notice you before, I think it’s changing. He’s around you all the time now, and he sees you confident and in your element.” She scooted her chair closer to her daughter and pushed a strand of her daughter’s hair back behind her ear. “You heart is a prize.”

Marinette pulled back and fiddled with the handle of her cup. “I don’t know. I’m so intimidated by his father that I think I probably look more foolish than ever to him. It’s all I can do not to embarrass myself at work.”

Intimidated by his father… “How is it working for Mr Agreste, by the way?”

Marinette’s frown deepened. “It’s really hard. He’s so brilliant, and he expects so much of all his employees. He’s got me running errands and doing other things for him constantly. Well, Nathalie has me doing that. I don’t know how she’s stuck around. I’m sure she is in love with him.” Marinette looked down pensively. “But I guess because he’s so charismatic, he can convince her to do anything...”

Sabine swallowed hard at that, while Marinette, seemingly unaware of the turmoil she was feeling, snatched a slice of raisin bread and started to eat.

“Marinette...you know if a boy pushes you to do something you’re not ready for, you can say no… right? I know I’ve told you before, but…do you *know* it?”

Her daughter’s mouth fell open. “What? Yes, wh-huh? Of course! Yes, I know that. Yesyes! But no-nothing’s happening! Adrien doesn’t see me that way! He’s just a friend. Friends don’t do that! Of course we wouldn’t be doing anything like that! hahahAHAHAhhaha! Right? Right!”

“Well with second boyfriends, things always move faster than with the first...”

“Mom, me and Luka didn’t even kiss! There’s no way this hypothetical second boyfriend would...get my goods so soon!”

“Okay, okay. And you know if it’s a man, you should *always* say no, right? You’re so young, but there are manipulative men out there who might try to take advantage of you. Maybe even charismatic ones...”

“Ew. Mom, where is this coming from?”

“I just want to make sure you’re prepared. It’s a lot easier to say ‘yes’ to something if you haven’t decided ahead of time to say ‘no.’ And you are working at that internship now; you’re around a lot of men without any supervision.”

“Mom, I think most of them are gay.”

“I’m sure not all of them. For example...Adrien’s father isn’t gay.”

“Ew. Mom, *seriously*? That’s *gross*. He’s like, actually *old*. And he’s my *boss*! Why would you even *think* I could be attracted to him? And besides, Mr Agreste has some secret fling going on with Nathalie. It’s so obvious they’re sneaking off to dark corners to do things. You don’t have to worry about that at all! *Yuck!*” Marinette tittered a bit more before getting quiet again. She looked down and resumed nibbling on her breakfast.

It was hard to tell if she was nervous or just weirded out by the subject. Either way, the conversation wasn’t going to bear more fruit. Sabine would have to find another way to look into what went on at the offices.

Sabine forced a smile. “Okay, Marinette, I’m glad. I just wanted to make sure you’re prepared. It’s increasingly not our job to make your decisions for you; we’re supposed to protect you and equip you to make your own decisions. You’re still young—“

“—I’m fourteen already.”

“That’s still young, sweetie. But I know what you mean. You’re becoming a lovely young woman, and we just want to help you become mature enough to live apart from us. You’ve only got a few more years in the bakery, and then there’s so many more things you’ll need to be wise to.”

“I know, Maman.” Marinette nodded. She reached over the table and put her hand on Sabine’s. “Thank you for looking out for me. I couldn’t ask for a better mom.”

Sabine bit her lip and smiled, forcing it to reach her eyes.

OK, what now?

Chapter End Notes

First and foremost, I'd like to remedy an oversight: I'm a member of a cozy Discord server called Sanctuary, which was created by Ao3's sagansjagger and some of her friends. If you'd like to join us, click here. There are many great fandom spaces, but I find this one so full of hygge, Gemütlichkeit, whatever you'd like to call it.

Second, I posted ch1 before two of Team Sabinefic's stories came out. So now I'd like to direct you to

- RaspberryCatapult's Outback Camp, in which the akuma class takes a class trip to the Australian Outback!
- WeHadABondingMoment's Bubblegum Soul, a story that takes place after Hawkmoth's defeat and centers on Adrien, who now knows he's a sentibeing.

Finally, my musings on this chapter, which are in honor of Kasienda, who always educates me with her end notes.

Regarding poolish and biga, these are both the first thing you make when preparing French and Italian breads, respectively. It helps to wake up the yeast for the main ferment. I think people usually know this concept by the term “starter” from sourdough bread baking.

I bake French bread a lot at home, and to make the poolish (just like the biga), you need only wheat flour, warm water, and yeast. It's left for a few hours to activate. It’s actually pretty sour by itself, but Tom’s not exactly going to insult his girlfriend like that!

Starters aren’t strictly necessary, but they make the bread taste so much better!

This concept also exists in China. Laomian (“old dough”) is a crucial ingredient in making really good dim sum. But I figured Sabine wouldn’t have called her young boyfriend “old dough”! He’s big and half-Italian, so of course “biga” makes sense as a nickname!

If you want more information about laomian, you can watch this great video here.

噢，很高興認識您，王先生！我叫郑夏冰
Oh, pleasure to meet you, Mr Wang! I'm Zheng Xiabing. (This is the pinyin rendering of her name as recorded in the Taiwanese version of the show, where they actually assign her the hanzi 郑夏冰. Her given name means "summer ice"!). Master Fu actually uses his first name when he introduces himself, as his last name is Wang, not Fu! I didn't know this until I researched the Taiwanese version of the show.

恭喜有喜了 Congratulations.

I want to share something about living as a multilingual person (in my home we speak three languages, plus I know a fourth I don't use much anymore). We code switch and signal things to each other in different ways, and I tried to capture that in Sabine's chat with Master Fu.

She switches to English (well, French) when she explains that she goes by 'Sabine' in Paris in order to signal to Fu that she's fine with speaking in French with him (you might say she prefers it). Her French is excellent, and she can tell his is as well. Plus, she's explaining her preferred name in Paris, so why not use the language of Paris?

The show doesn't delve into much of Fu's past, but his last name is a very common name in China, but as a young boy he was in Tibet. China didn't annex Tibet until well after he came to France, and they didn't promote Mandarin there until the late 50s I think. So Wang's Mandarin proficiency is a question mark for me. Did they speak it at the temple? Did they not, but he spoke it at home before being shipped off to the temple by his parents?

Plus, Sabine is from Shanghai, where they have a totally different dialect/language (Shanghainese), but Mandarin is also spoken there. In my story, she's from the upper class, and also she grew up at a time when regional dialects were losing ground to standard Mandarin.

So, in my mind, Sabine is a native Mandarin speaker (but also can speak Shanghainese, and she uses a tiny bit of it in my story), and I think of Fu as someone who doesn't have native Mandarin, but he came to Paris so long ago that he's been exposed to it (and other dialects) by the local Chinese diaspora, so he likes to use it when he can. However, his French is superior, as it's been his main language for decades now.

Dark Cupid

Chapter Summary

It was times like this that she regretted—only in the darkest recesses of her heart—that she didn't have more control over her daughter like her mother had once had over her. She felt guilty for even thinking it, and she'd certainly never tell Tom. But she understood how a mother's fear could turn into a spear, jabbing away, intent on subjugating a defiant daughter.

But Marinette wasn't defiant. She was determined. Those two character traits were the same object, just viewed from a different perspective. And she couldn't afford to lose perspective.

Sabine worries at home while Marinette and Alya go shopping. And when they return home, Sabine gets more to worry about.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After breakfast, Sabine headed down to the bakery to take over for Tom. Her mind was analyzing everything Marinette had said over the meal. It was nice, though, that Marinette had gotten up before noon for a change; they hadn't had a heart-to-heart in so long, and she had known they were overdue.

Later that morning, a familiar face walked past the bakery window.

Alya.

Her heart raced.

On one hand, Marinette told Alya *everything*. Maybe Alya knew what had happened to her.

On the other hand, it was conceivable that, had Gabriel touched Marinette, she wouldn't even have told her best friend. There were plenty of reasons why girls thought no one would believe their claims of victimization, as Marinette no doubt was aware. Any given night, one could turn on the news and hear another seemingly powerful woman unburden herself about an even more powerful man taking advantage. And this was a young, unknown girl with *Gabriel Agreste*, who probably had *Eyes Wide Shut* parties in his basement with people like Tomoe Tsurugi and Audrey Bourgeois.

Sabine had fostered a closeness with Marinette. She expressed her unconditional love regularly, she supported her daughter's dreams, and she shared (some of) her own emotional struggles. Teenagers were smart, and they could tell when adults were keeping secrets. It was one thing to present a façade of parental infallibility to young children; it was quite another to *lie* to your teenager about it.

But ever since the expulsion incident, she'd grown increasingly guilt-ridden, worrying that she'd lost her daughter's confidence. Of course she wasn't infallible! The evidence had been right there for everyone to see that day.

But she'd never once thought Marinette was keeping secrets from her until now.

Alya pushed open the door and walked into the bakery. "Hey, Mme C."

"Alya, I didn't know you were coming over."

"Me and Marinette are gonna go shopping at the flea market. She had an idea for a patchwork dress, and I was planning on looking for vintage costume jewelry. Nino and Adrien are supposed to meet us there."

Oh, that's why she'd been up early enough for tea and talk.

Sabine forced a smile. "Oh, that sounds...*dreamy*!" She snickered.

Alya snickered back.

Marinette came bounding down the stairs and planted herself between them. "Hey, Alya. What's so funny?"

Sabine and Alya made eye contact over Marinette's shoulder, the image of a white-overshirted boy-in-miniature frolicking along their sightline, back and forth. One could almost hear pigeons coo-cooing in the distance.

"Oh, nothing, sweetie. I hear you're going to look for fabric remnants."

"Yep!"

"Can you swing by the florist and pick up *buttercups* while you're out?"

Alya started laughing.

Marinette stared at them both. "Okay?"

Alya continued the teasing. "Hey girl, maybe you'll get lucky and find a little scrap of Agreste to play with!" She was slapping her thighs, almost crying.

Sabine stopped laughing. Thinking back to the previous night and to her conversation with Tom, she was mortified.

Alya, no!

She glanced over at her daughter, who seemed unaffected by the comment.

"It's 'Gabriel,' not 'Agreste.' Wait—" Marinette blushed, finally getting it. "That's not funny."

"Hey, what are you ladies laughing about?" Tom asked from the storeroom.

Sabine looked back over her shoulder. "Nothing, dear! Alya's just teasing Marinette!"

“Oh, did she steal someone's phone again?!" asked Tom.

Marinette gasped. "Worst parents ever."

Alya giggled. “Oh my God, Marinette, I didn't realize your dad was such a troll!"

Sabine cleared her throat. “Speaking of trolls, spill the tea: what has my daughter told you about working for Gabriel Agreste? She won’t tell me anything, and I’m dying to know.”

To the side, she saw Marinette roll her eyes. “Ugh, not this again. Nothing happened!”

Alya looked between the two of them. “I feel like I’m out of the loop.”

Marinette growled. “My mom doesn’t seem to like me working for Mr Agreste, and she’s inventing reasons to tell me to quit. She thinks I’m attracted to Adrien’s dad!”

Alya’s eyes bugged out. “What?”

Oh no. She hadn’t meant to bring *this* up around Alya.

“Marinette, I...I didn’t say you were *attracted* to him. I just meant that powerful men can get away with a lot—”

“He’s not a criminal, *Maman*! He’s just—”

“An asshole?”

“Alya!”

“Well if the shoe fits…” said Alya. “In this case a very expensive shoe…”

Sabine frowned. *Then who was it in the sketch?*

“You know, menopause can cause paranoia, *Maman*.”

Sabine sighed. “I love that you have this opportunity, Marinette. But Alya, Marinette had a nightmare, she was screaming, and—”

She realized she shouldn’t be telling Alya this without asking Marinette’s permission first. She tried to recover. “And based on what she was saying, I’m just worried that she’s being…pushed too hard. That’s all.” She yearned to be straight with Alya—the girl was blunter than a rolling pin.

Sabine was desperate for help. However, it felt wrong to out Marinette if she had, in fact, been assaulted.

Alya snorted. “Oh, she’s definitely being taken advantage of. She’s shadowing *Mlle Ice Queen*. I don’t think that woman ever sleeps. When she’s not trailing at her boss’s heel, she’s driving Adrien crazy. And I can’t get a read on her at all! Just about the only thing I’m certain of is she can’t be Hawkmoth because she’d have no time!” Alya glanced at her phone. “And speaking of ‘no time,’ we need to leave now or we’re going to be late.”

“Ahh, you’re right!” Marinette screamed as she exploded into a flurry of movement.

Sabine caught Marinette's eye as she began grabbing her things. It looked like her daughter had realized their earlier conversation was about more than just hypothetical men, and that she now believed it to be an accusation.

She shouldn't have told Alya about the nightmare.

That's something Mama would've done.

Marinette snatched her things and rushed toward the door, dragging Alya along. Sabine felt like her daughter was sand slipping through her fingers and high tide was coming. What was most upsetting, however, was that Alya had played it off as ludicrous, but was obviously rushing Marinette out the door to escape the conversation.

She must be lying.

"We expect you home by 7 for dinner!" she shouted at her daughter's retreating form. But she wasn't sure if Marinette heard her.

She was growing accustomed to that feeling.

Sabine worked in the bakery through rush hour, going through the motions and watching the clock. She thought she could hear the grinding of the gears slow down, denying her the break she needed. On more than one occasion, she accidentally gave away pastries for free.

Most days, when she saw a regular customer come in, she'd fill the order of whoever was at the register while also packing up the usual order of the friend who just entered. But today, she'd been listless and anxious, and the regulars could tell.

Is she going to be safe with Alya?

Adrien will be there; he's handy with a sword.

"Mme Cheng, are you feeling alright?" asked Dr Desrosiers as he leaned in and peered into her eyes with concern, as if he were giving her a wellness exam. He practically kept baker's hours, even on days he didn't have clinic.

"Sabine, is there something the matter?" asked Mme Boucher, Marinette's old math teacher from élémentaire, when she dashed in after her weekend half-marathon training. "Is everyone okay?"

"Miss Cheng, ma'am, is there something I can help you with?" asked Mrs Rogers, an expat who had moved here with her young family for a "more agreeable lifestyle."

Do Americans never watch international news?

"Mme Cheng?"

What am I going to do?

"Mme Cheng!"

She felt someone shaking her shoulder, and she was pulled back into her body. She shook her head to gather her attention that she'd cast to the ground.

It was Frankie, an actor who was staying nearby while he worked on a small film. She caught his blue eyes before looking down at the rows of croissants in the display case. She reached in and bagged his normal order.

"I'm sorry, Mr Auberjonois. Here you go!" She handed his food over as he handed her the money. She watched him go, mentally urging him to move faster so she could call Tom to the register and dash upstairs.

The moment he'd closed the door behind him, Sabine called out to her husband. "Tom, would you mind watching the storefront for a bit?"

Her husband trundled into the storefront, wiping his hands and his brow. "Sure thing, honey."

Sabine craned her neck to meet his lips for a kiss before she walked out, taking great pains to appear nonchalant.

She strode up the floors, taking stairs two at a time, until she was below the ladder to Marinette's room, out of breath. Staring up at the door, it felt like a portal to a darker universe she didn't want to visit.

She hesitated for a moment, trying to calculate when her daughter might return home. Realizing there was no way she could predict when her daughter would return, she climbed up through the trapdoor without bothering to close it.

She went straight to the ladder and climbed up to Marinette's bed, lying down and focusing on *that sketch* like she was watching the sky for meteors.

Reveal your secrets.

But of course, the sketch didn't respond.

And like when one sits out and watches for shooting stars scraping across the darkness right at the edge of one's peripheral vision, she felt like she was *just* missing something important.

She squinted at the picture, but couldn't make heads or tails of it.

The man was as she remembered. Tall, thin, white hair (albeit unkempt), blue eyes, a white tuxedo, white gloves, and an expression that straddled the line between malice and indifference. Everything about this picture screamed "Gabriel Agreste."

But why the mask?

Marinette might have given him a mask to hide his identity in her drawing. Like magic, masks seemed to work that way. It was a point against finding any clues if her daughter anticipated the picture being used against her secret-keeping.

But as Sabine continued to look, she noticed something. *Regret*. Whatever Marinette had intended to depict in this sketch, the man regretted something.

Does she think he regrets what he did? Does she *regret what* she *did? Or…what happened* to *her against her will?*

Victims often blame themselves. She blamed herself plenty for things in her past even though it was irrational. Deprogramming yourself was hard work, made harder when you were trying to build and run a business. Some days, all she had was an infusion of calming *Camellia sinensis*, but oolong was a *pu'er* substitute for thera-tea.

Ugh, an accidental double pun. Tom would squee if he knew.

Why would Marinette hang this sketch up where she knew they would see it? And the message was so brutal. Surely she *expected* questions. "Love destroys" was so wildly out of character for her.

Is this a cry for help?

She considered the split moon, too. What did it symbolize? Sabine had an excellent memory, but she couldn't recall anything Marinette had mentioned about Gabriel fashions involving the moon, so it wasn't likely to be an homage.

It has to be metaphorical. Certainly it isn't literal.

She recalled that Gabriel's favorite motif was a butterfly.

Butterflies aren't related to the moon, are they? Moths, sure, but butterflies?

She continued to stare at the picture, bouncing her feet on the mattress. She needed to scratch that carnal grin off the man's face with her nails.

No one gets to look at my daughter *like that!*

If only that mouth could talk; he could tell her who he was. But pictures couldn't talk. She needed to get her *daughter* to talk.

She could try to flatter her draftsmanship, but Marinette would see right through that. Her daughter was never one to accept a compliment graciously. It was always disbelief, embarrassment, confusion…exactly how Sabine had been at the same age.

Have I made her that way…like Mama made me?

She shuddered at the thought.

No. You've avoided so many pitfalls.

What should her next step be? She needed to dig deeper, but she was hesitant.

Do I talk to Nathalie? Alya? Confronting Marinette hasn't worked.

It was times like this that she regretted—only in the darkest recesses of her heart—that she didn't have more control over her daughter like her mother had once had over her. She felt guilty for even thinking it, and she'd certainly never tell Tom. But she understood how a mother's fear could turn into a spear, jabbing away, intent on subjugating a defiant daughter.

But Marinette wasn't *defiant*. She was *determined*. Those two character traits were the same object, just viewed from a different perspective. And she couldn't afford to lose perspective.

A memory came to her of pictures she once saw online of a sculpture called *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*. She'd talked about it with her sister Meilin, among the first generation of truly liberated women from China.

Meilin had commented that Medusa's pose reminded her of a teenager caught with a bottle of beer and cigarettes, needing a strong hand to be put back in line. It was no wonder her daughter Bridgette had called Auntie Sabine, crying about how she couldn't wait to get away from home and go to university.

In contrast, when Sabine looked at *Medusa*, she saw Ladybug with the severed head of Hawkmoth. A woman determined to live against seemingly insurmountable odds. It was what she prayed would come to Ladybug—that distant avatar of hope—in time, and it was what she wanted for Marinette, too.

Out of ideas, Sabine decided it was time to take a book break. Maybe if she stepped away from the problem, a mouse of an idea might scurry its way into her brain.

She climbed down the ladder and gave the room a final glance to make sure there was no trace of her being there. Then she went back downstairs to tend to their customers and give her husband a break.

Some hours later, Sabine heard Alya shouting outside the bakery.

"Marinette? Marinette!" Alya's voice was like the scream of a rabbit, a crippling wail of pain. Sabine felt the hairs on her arm stand on end. Already on edge about assault—

She dropped her towel, shot an apologetic look at the customer she was helping, and rushed out onto the street, desperately scanning for her daughter.

There! Wait, what's going on?

Marinette was on her knees on the sidewalk, leaning forward on one hand, the other clutching her chest. Even at a distance, Sabine could see her daughter breathing hard.

She flew to her daughter's side. "Marinette! Alya, what's going on?" Out on the sidewalk, a sheen of sweat had formed on Marinette's skin.

Is she having a heart attack? How is that possible?

Alya spoke with authority: "Stand right there in front of her, Mme C." Then her attention turned back to her best friend, continuing to talk slowly, in a gentle but determined voice. "Marinette, I think you're having a panic attack. I'm here for you; so is your *maman*. Do you see her? She's right there. Can you breathe slowly for me? In, and out. Innnn, ooooout. Innnn, oooout. Watch me raise

my arm up and down." She began to move her arm a couple feet in front of Marinette in her line of sight.

Sabine zeroed in on her. She was humming and muttering, “No no no no." One of her pigtails had been pulled loose, like she felt constricted. Her hands were dirty, particularly the tips, where it seemed she had raked them across the sidewalk. Mascara streaked down to her cheekbones.

Sabine reached out and touched her, but Marinette wrenched herself away and curled into a ball.

"Nonononononononono." The muttering intensified, like Marinette was stitching a web of sound to protect herself…as if she couldn’t bear to be touched.

Alya grabbed Sabine's wrist. "Don't. Mme C, please, stand. right. there." She gave her a firm push, and Sabine felt her own legs guide her to where Alya was pointing.

What is this? A panic attack? Why would Alya be able to recognize a panic attack or know how to handle one?

"Good, Marinette, that's real good. Look, your *maman* is right there. She's watching over you. You're safe."

Marinette's head creaked upward, and Sabine felt the air sucked from her body. It was as if all Marinette's energy was being spent fighting what she was seeing in her mind. Her daughter wasn't looking *at* her; she was looking *through* her.

Sabine ached to know what Marinette was seeing. The customers from the boulangerie peered out the door, unmoving, and the crowds of Parisian foot traffic—many just tourists—rushed by, avoiding making eye contact with the frozen girl in the middle of the sidewalk. Sabine was reminded again of Medusa and her victims, turned to stone.

She opened her mouth to shout out for help, but Alya shook her head determinedly, as if to reassure Sabine that, unlike in the Medusa story, there was a way back home for her daughter.

She stood back, shifting her weight between feet, watching Alya help Marinette. She narrowed her eyes.

Alya must know something.

Has this happened before? Did Marinette tell her something and then they looked up online how to handle a panic attack?

Oh God, this must have happened before. When? How have I never noticed? How did I not know what to do?

I don't know what to do!

Her eyes could have eclipsed the sun. She panted and felt her mind turned inside out. The last time she’d felt this truly lost, she was a teenager, standing outside an apartment in a strange country, waiting for Tom to answer the door and tell her what to do.

A panic attack. That's what Alya said.

What's happened to you, Meiyun?

Her eyes were drawn down the street, following Marinette's stare. In front of *Chocolaterie Artémis* across the street, a teenager stood, dressed like Dark Cupid, slack-jawed. He was watching Marinette break down, arrows and a bow dashed before him on the ground.

He crossed the street, approaching slowly. "I– I was just standing here advertising the store. I didn't do anything…"

Sabine felt like she had dunked her head into a frigid lake. She felt wide awake but everything around her sounded distant and fuzzy.

"You didn't do anything wrong. It's just the costume," she heard Alya say. "But please, stay back."

Is the mere thought of love enough to do this now? How is Cupid triggering her? Or does that boy remind her of an akuma?

Sabine felt her body move without conscious thought, as it placed itself between the boy and her daughter.

"Mme Cheng, come here," Alya ordered. "Calmly."

Shocked out of her reverie by Alya's patronizing tone, she approached. Calmly.

Alya took Sabine's hand and placed it on Marinette's back, guiding her in drawing circles.

"Marinette, see? Your *maman* is right here. That's her hand on your back. Can you feel her touch?"

The *no*s had become intermittent. She felt Marinette shudder under her touch.

"…yes…I…yes…" Marinette struggled to speak, and then there was only a soft humming.

"Good. You're doing so well, M."

Sabine looked over at Alya, a million questions and accusations in her eyes.

Alya, what's happened to my baby? What isn't she telling me? You know, don't you? Why won't she tell me? Would you *tell me?*

But all she got back was silence, as if Alya's eyelashes filtered out any answer.

Sabine looked again at her daughter. "*Meiyun*, let's get you home and to bed."

Time seemed to stretch on forever as the few approaching pedestrians who hadn't marched back where they'd come from crossed the street to put distance between them.

After an exhausting few minutes, Marinette drew a long, shuddering breath, shivered, and finally spoke. "Okay."

With great effort, she stood up, Alya and Sabine flanking her on either side, bearing much of her body weight.

"Alya?" Marinette asked, her voice like autumn leaves crushed beneath a boot.

"Yes?"

She was silent for a moment, struggling to aim her mouth closer to her friend's ear, as if she didn't want her mother to hear what was about to sneak out.

Sabine ordered her heart to settle down and pretended like she wasn't paying attention so that the girls would keep talking. So she could spy on them.

"I just wanted him to stop hurting me," Marinette murmured. "I didn't want to kiss him. But I had to so he would stop..."

A coldness creeped over Sabine's chest, and she almost tripped as the sensation slithered down her torso to her legs. As they walked back to the bakery, she struggled to bear her own weight, let alone her daughter's. With every footfall, she felt invisible chains around her ankles grow heavier.

She glanced one last time at the Cupid boy. She noticed a banner out by the storefront: "Sweets so sinful you'll hate yourself."

Oh, God.

Chapter End Notes

First, a MASSIVE thank you to WeHadABondingMoment for helping me get the panic attack scene right!

Second, now that Sabine's sister has a mention and a name, I wanted to share something about Chinese names.

I'm not following these conventions strictly, but a husband and wife will keep their own family names legally when they get married (but it's not rare for a woman to take her husband's name informally).

The children then will get one of the parents' family names as their own. It's typically the father's.

This means that Sabine's mother is not a Cheng. And since we know that Sabine's uncle is Wang Cheng, this means he's from Sabine's father's side of the family.

Chinese family names tend to be one character (and thus one syllable) in length: Wang, Cheng, Tsai, Huang, Li, etc.

First names often have two characters (and thus two syllables), but they don't have to. Master Fu doesn't. Nor does Sabine's uncle (Wang Cheng). But Sabine (Xiabing) does.

In a family, it's a common practice for the first character of a two-character names among a generation to be the same, and the other is different between family members.

So you might have two sisters whose name begins with 喜 (xi, happiness) but the second character differs so they have different names, but they're linked!

I've deviated from this for reasons I'll try to remember to comment on when it's more relevant. But I couldn't pass up the opportunity to infodump ASAP about Chinese naming conventions.

Oh, also, the "mei" in Marinette's Chinese name is not the same as in Sabine's sister's name.

I've mentioned Marinette's before, and it means "plum" alone but also can be an allusion to the plum blossom, or 梅花 (literally "plum" + "flower") However, Meilin's "mei" means "beautiful" (美林, "beautiful" + "forest"). This is the same name as the main character in Turning Red, if you've seen that movie.

—

Also, if you're curious, the Medusa and Perseus statues I've mentioned are both real! They're both also potentially NSFW depending on how much your boss appreciates classical sculpture!

And if you want to see some art I created for the panic attack, it's here

Rice Flour

Chapter Summary

Sabine sighed. “Your father cut off contact with his father for me. And after years of marriage, I could tell how hard the separation had been on him. Your grand-père taught him everything __”

“Not everything.” Marinette pointed at her. “He fell in love with you. He married you.”

Sabine smiled. Their love had overcome so much, and this love was a precious part of her life.“Yes, he did. And I married him knowing what his family was like. I took away so many years between them by allowing your father to put me first. When you came home with Rolland after he’d been akumatized, I didn’t want to do that to you, too. You’d only just found him. And people can change, so I kept quiet.”

Sabine and Marinette have a heart-to-heart talk, and we get to see some of the role Rolland Dupain has played in both of their lives.

Chapter Notes

Translation notes:

Heng (哼): harumph, a grunt of frustration

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Sabine knelt in front of the display cases, wiping down the dust that had settled overnight on the glass. She looked over at her daughter, who was up early (again!), helping divide up cash for the till.

Something had been tapping away at her brain, like the *drip drip* of water torture. Maybe her initial assumption was wrong. Maybe the sketch wasn’t Gabriel Agreste. He was a leading contender, so she’d gone with it. But she couldn’t shake that gut feeling.

Still, after the panic attack yesterday…well, had it just been someone under the influence of Dark Cupid? It was highly unlikely it could’ve been Gabriel, because hadn’t Dark Cupid made people behave contrary to their emotions? She loved her daughter with all her heart, but there was no way the man who’d married Emilie Graham de Vanily could have *romantic feelings* for a fourteen-year old girl he’d barely met. At worst, he would’ve become verbally demonstrative about her designs. But still…

Maybe multiple incidents?

She threw the brakes, not wanting to see where that particular train of thought went. *Okay, maybe Dark Cupid had turned a stranger, and she'd had to fight him off? Hadn't Ladybug rescued Chat Noir by kissing him?* Maybe Marinette had done the same thing.

She really hoped that everything going on was only about an unwanted kiss.

Only an unwanted kiss.

The thought left a bad taste, as if that particular poison had oozed across her tongue. Aiming to wash her mouth out with something productive, she decided to get right into it.

"Marinette, what happened to you when Dark Cupid attacked?"

Marinette stopped flipping through the stack of bills. "Wh–why do you ask?"

"I heard you and Alya whispering when we were helping you home."

Her daughter shook her head and smiled thinly, resuming her counting. "Oh, I don't remember what I was saying. I was so out of it, you know? It was probably nonsense! You know how it is… *forty, fifty, fifty-five…*"

Sabine thought back to her own panic attacks, sometimes coming on when she stepped into an alley at dusk, or looked at a stone lantern the wrong way at *Jardin Yili*. Sure, they could mess with your memory, but Marinette must've been remembering something *real.*

She shook her head. "No, I don't 'know how it is.' But I went back to the Ladyblog and TVi footage of the attack, and I couldn't find you anywhere." She hesitated before continuing. "But the akuma shot people and jumbled up their feelings. I heard you tell Alya you kissed someone so he'd stop hurting you. So I'm almost afraid to ask if you meant Luka."

Her daughter stopped sorting the float, looking confused. "Luka? But Luka would never—"

"Yes, that's the point. *He* would never. But if Dark Cupid had shot him, then he would've acted pretty different, right? And I know how he felt about you back then."

Marinette looked almost *offended* on his behalf, but there was a wobble in her voice, almost imperceptible. "But I hadn't even met Luka yet. And I don't really remember what went on that day. Nothing happened to me. That whole day is a blur."

Sabine moved toward her daughter, reaching out her hand. "But Marinette, you said—"

"It was the ramblings of a tired girl, *Maman*." Marinette huffed, slipped the money into the till, slammed the drawer shut, and stepped out of reach.

Sabine closed the distance, opening her mouth to continue the inquest, but the street entrance to the bakery opened, and she glanced over to see who had arrived. A new delivery boy entered, carting in sacks of flour on a dolly. She growled in frustration. *Heng.* It was as if the universe was plotting to keep her in the dark.

"Hello, ma'am. Just dropping off the extra flour you rush ordered."

“Thank you. Could you wheel it over here? I’ll take them to the storeroom from there.”

As she led the delivery boy away, she glanced over at Marinette, trying to signal with her eyes, *We aren’t finished with this conversation.*

Marinette didn’t respond, as if pretending she hadn’t caught her signal.

Sabine carried the sacks over to Tom as he checked their inventory leading up to the event they would be catering that weekend.

“Everything check out, Biga?”

Tom chuckled. “Looks like it, Poolish.”

Sabine set the final sacks down and walked over to Tom, wrapping her arms around him from behind. She took a deep breath of his scent. He smelled of yeast, cinnamon, and olive oil.

He trailed one finger along her forearm, drawing waves as he went. “You know, you keep giving me attention like this, I might have to ask you to marry me.”

“Pfft. Like I’d say ‘yes’ to you. What do you even have to offer, big, strong stranger?”

Tom spun in her embrace, grinning at her. His mustache dangled like cheese before a mouse, and she felt a pull toward his lips. “My name? Dupain. We are an illustrious family, you know. We invented bread.”

Sabine cackled. “Oh, I’d forgotten all about that story your father told me when I first met him.”

“Sir, this is my girlfriend, Sabine.”

Trying to ignore her nerves, she extended her hand and smiled hesitantly at this man her husband seemed too afraid to call “Papa.“

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr Dupain.”

Rolland Dupain looked at the hand that had been extended to him. Then he looked her in the eye. Or at *her eyes. And then he looked back to her hand and crossed his over his chest.*

“Does she have a last name, Thomas?”

She piped up. ”It’s—“

“I asked my son.”

Tom frowned. “It’s ’Cheng,’ sir.” He spoke loudly, but it sounded like a squirrel whose chirps were just resonating in a large drum. She’d never heard him sound so frail.

“As in PF Cheng’s? Is that your family?”

She parted her lips in confusion before Tom spoke up as if to protect her. "What are you talking about?"

"It's a restaurant chain. Cheng's. Or Chong's." He waved his hand as if dismissing a correction that hadn't come. "Close enough. I read the trade publications every week."

Rolland turned back to her. "The Dupains are an illustrious family, you know. We invented bread. It's our heritage. And I like to ask other people about theirs."

Sabine glanced at Tom, silently asking him, "Is he for real?" He looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole.

So I'm not the only one with a parent like Mama.

Rolland took a deep breath, puffing his chest out, and launched into what seemed to be a speech he'd committed to memory, sticking out an additional finger for each point in his spiel. "You see, our family stretches back beyond Loafamix the Gaul, whose yeast strain we still use in-house. Our coat of arms alludes to the appearance of leavened bread, and the Council of Heraldry and Vexillology in Belgium has concluded that it's because our family has a claim to the earliest yeast bread in Europe."

He cast a rotten glance at Tom. "A legacy we don't like to put in jeopardy. Thomas, have you been experimenting with new ingredients in your bread again?"

Sabine felt her own chest puff out with pride. She'd watched Tom play around with rice flour portions in his doughs. She'd seen him smile, felt the cheap apartment floor tremble as he danced about the kneading table, and heard him hum as he tasted the various loaves. It was amazing *what he'd been able to do by mixing techniques from different parts of the world!*

But when she squeezed his hand and looked at his face in profile, he just looked sad.

However, in his forest green eyes, she saw a landslide rushing downhill. H e clenched his jaw, as if he were preparing to defend a treasure. "There wasn't anything wrong with me mixing in quinoa. You just added too much fire to the dough when it was most delicate, and it split!"

"Well good riddance! It got you back to pure French loaves again, didn't it? Hopefully this little rice dalliance *of yours will end up the same."*

Tom was squeezing Sabine's hand hard, his arm shaking. She was starting to feel like this was not actually about bread.

He shifted on his feet, and whether he realized what he'd done, she recognized it immediately as him assuming a more rooted stance.

Tom rose to his full stature, towering over his father, and pumped their entwined hands as he spoke. "This time it will be different. I'm sure this blend has a future."

Tom's eyes darkened at the memory. "That didn't go so well, did it?"

"No, it did not! But that's okay. Your rice *dalliance* became a rice *alliance*! And in a way, he and my mother drove us together. I believe we would've found our way to each other eventually, and

after your gallantry how could I have resisted? I mean, I guess your puns could've driven me away, but—"

"Hey, I'm funny! People like those jokes! Marinette likes those jokes!"'

"No she doesn't, To—."

"Yes, she does!" Tom pouted. "And Chat Noir! He *loved* those things when he had dinner with us!"

Sabine sighed, feeling like she'd had this argument a hundred times. "Maybe so. But he's not funny, either."

Tom huffed. "You're right. You know, I'm still sore about how hot and cold he was with our baby."

"Well, what are you gonna do? He's dialed into Ladybug. What chance did Marinette stand against some woman squeezed into a skintight outfit? Plus he's probably too old for Marinette if he's going after someone like Ladybug—I think she's immortal." Her smile came to a rest, lopsided on her face. "At least she put herself out there, unlike with Adrien. Progress, you know? She's growing up."

She thought again about the nightmare, the sketch, and Dark Cupid. "Just not too fast, I hope."

Tom grunted as he rearranged seven sacks of flour at the same time. "I guess so."

Sabine dusted her hands off and wiped them on her apron. "Okay, I'm headed back to the storefront. She's awake and helping, so I've been trying to pry information out of her."

Tom threw the sacks of flour on the ground and hopped over to Sabine, hugging her. He looked down at his wife and laughed, drawing her attention to the fact that she was now covered head to toe with flour, like a cloud had vomited on her. "Hahaha! Well, let this fairy dust bring you luck, honey!"

But when Sabine considered the white that now decorated her apron, all she could think about was the sketch and Gabriel Agreste.

Sabine emerged from the storeroom into the bakery to see Marinette looking down, fiddling with the hem of her blazer, obviously trying to distract herself from her discomfort with the delivery boy.

He was encroaching into her personal space, trapping her against the wall.

"—exotic like you, I bet you can bake some pretty unique bread."

Sabine felt her blood boil, and she rushed over to him, balling her fists. She jabbed one finger right in his face and then at their antique bread paddle on the wall. "Young man, if you don't want that handle shoved up your ass, you should leave right now."

The boy looked stupid enough that Sabine thought he might make the same pass at her next. His breath *reeked*. But when she reached for the paddle, he fled.

She turned to Marinette and examined her, fussing about, looking up and down for any injuries. Marinette had her arms around her torso, hugging herself, and sweeping the ground with one foot.

"I'll call our supplier about him right away. But first, are you okay?"

Marinette pushed her hands away. "I'm—I'm okay. He didn't touch me. He was j-just being *gross*. Y-yeah. It's nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Sabine felt the world upend itself. *Dealt with before?*

How could she have missed that?

The direction of her daughter's gaze told more of the truth than her words. Sabine took Marinette's hand in hers and circled her thumb along the back of her daughter's wrist. She'd experienced this so often herself, and she'd always suspected her mother had, the way she'd been suspicious of Tom. And she remembered her sister calling her, frantic about something she'd heard lobbed her way on the street.

It's everywhere, I knew it, and I didn't prepare her. But how do you prepare your child for a life lived skating atop a frozen lake of violence?

"I'm so sorry, honey. I never wanted you to have to go through stuff like that." She paused, thinking again about the leer that boy had thrown at Marinette, and the face casting the leer morphed in her mind. It took the form of numerous men passing by her on the street who had objectified and othered her, wanting to treat her as an imported plaything. Then the leer took on the form of the man in the sketch.

"You know…when I first moved to Paris, I had to deal with stereotypes, too."

Marinette didn't look surprised, which in itself was an indictment of *something*. "How come you never talk about it?"

Why *didn't* she talk about it? She searched for an answer better than the ugly truth, but there wasn't one. "That's a good question, *Baobei*. I guess at first I was just happy to be in Paris and didn't want to make any waves. And then it just became a habit; besides, other than your father, would anyone have listened to a Chinese immigrant anyway? When that actress accused Gerard Depardieu of sexual assault, even *women* defended him just because he was a great artist! Like he had a *right* to her body."

She searched her daughter's eyes, apologizing with a glance for what she was about to say. "Even when I met your grandfather, he wasn't…kind."

Marinette sniffed and looked at her toes, before confessing in a voice like the wind through overgrown grass. "I know." Her eyes climbed back up to meet Sabine's. They were laden with unshed tears. "That's…been the hardest thing about getting to know him, trying to square how he is with *me* with how I figured out he'd been with *you*."

Sabine smiled wanly at her daughter, but spoke with reassurance. "I don't view it as a betrayal, if you're worried about that."

Marinette shook her head. "I know you understand. But *I* don't understand why you've never said anything. Or why *Papa* hasn't."

She sighed. “Your father cut off contact with his father *for me*. And after years of marriage, I could tell how hard the separation had been on him. Your grand-père taught him *everything*—”

“Not *everything*.” Marinette pointed at her. “He fell in love with *you*. He married *you*.”

Sabine smiled. Their love had overcome so much, and this love was a precious part of her life.“Yes, he did. And I married him knowing what his family was like. I took away so many years between them by *allowing* your father to put me first. When you came home with Rolland after he’d been akumatized, I didn’t want to do that to you, too. You’d only just found him. And people can change, so I kept quiet.”

Marinette pointed at her. “But that’s exactly the problem! No one ever speaks up, so when someone does, it seems unbelievable, or people make excuses! And *that’s* why Alya’s never told her mom about the catcalls she gets, either.”

A chill overcame her. *Catcalls? They’re still only children!*

“It’s happening to Alya, too?”

Marinette scoffed. “*Maman*, have you *seen* Alya? She calls herself a ‘Creole smokeshow’!” She flailed her hands around her chest and hips.

Sabine was too shocked to laugh. “But she’s just fourteen!”

“Like that stops the kind of guy who catcalls? I’ve heard boys at school joke around, ‘Old enough to bleed, old enough—’!”

“Stop! I’ve heard it before. I don’t need to hear it again!” Sabine felt ill. “It’s disgusting!”

‘I know. But that’s how boys are.”

“No, Marinette. Don’t make excuses for them. Your father never talks like that.”

“Yeah, well that’s because Papa is special.”

“Sure, he’s special. But not because he respects women enough not to casually belittle them—plenty of men are like that. It’s one of those things that *makes* a man. You shouldn’t lower your standards just because a lot of *boys* talk like that… Does Nino talk like that? Does *Adrien* talk like that?”

Marinette laughed, but with little mirth. “I don’t think Adrien could say ‘boob’ if his life depended on it, let alone talk like *that*.”

“What about Chat Noir?”

Marinette’s eyes widened. “Chat Noir?”

“Oh come on, you told him you loved him! You must have spent time with him somewhere. What, did he whisk you away to the Eiffel Tower or something?”

Marinette blushed.

Sabine rushed her hand to her daughter’s shoulder. “He didn’t!”

"…he did. But just as friends! Do you remember Evillustrator?"

"What?"

"The akuma. Evillustrator. It was Nathaniel from school. I kiiiinda helped Ladybug by going on date with him."

"Well, Nathaniel is a nice boy. But you shouldn't—"

"No. I went on a date with *Evillustrator*."

Sabine's heart stopped. "Nathaniel *when he was akumatized*?!"

"Umm, yeah." Marinette began tapping her fingers on her thighs. "He got akumatized because he wanted to go on a date with me. Of course I…I wasn't interested, and, um, well—"

Sabine slashed the air with her palm as if it were a guillotine, cutting that subject of discussion off at the neck. "I don't want to hear what emotion Hawkmoth was playing on."

"But that's how I met Chat. And, well…he's not *just* a pun machine…" Marinette smiled fondly.

The low roll of her daughter's voice through her chest as her eyes twinkled buoyed Sabine's spirits. Marinette had scrawled "love destroys" alone in her room, yet here she was nearly blushing at the memory of a moon-bathed twilight above the city. "Well, they do say a girl will end up with a boy like her own father."

"I think the similarities stop at puns. Anyway, he's just a friend."

A customer walked in, and Sabine smiled and stepped back from her. She brushed her hands on her trousers. "Well, regardless, I'm sorry you've had your share of jerks. I remember how small I felt when I got the 'China doll' stuff hurled at me."

Marinette skipped toward her again and hugged her tightly, one arm around her waist and one cupping her head to her shoulder.

When did she get so tall?

Sabine returned the hug, but noticed how easily her arms reached around her.

"I'm sorry you had those experiences, *Maman*. But look at you now, owner of the best bakery in Paris!"

Sabine smiled. "That's right! And one day people in Paris will be wearing *your* clothes."

Marinette pumped her fist, a flash of something heroic in her eyes. "The Chinese are invading."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to UpTooLateArt and RaspberryCatapult for beta reading this chapter, and a special thank you to Hamsterrific for being what I've since learned is called a "sensitivity

reader" for portions of this chapter.

I confess that the first time I watched Bakerix, I didn't immediately pick up on the "rice flour as metaphor for race mixing" thing. But once someone pointed out to me that Rolland seemed particularly opposed to rice being included in French baking, I couldn't un-notice it.

That started my long love affair with works that acknowledge that Marinette is mixed-race, and her mother is an immigrant. You can imagine how much I adore the episode Qilin!

The show almost never talks about race. I think to a certain extent this is a French thing, but I could be wrong. I've seen interviews with French people who are opposed to this idea of you being French and African, for example, whereas in the US it's a normal way of seeing things. That you can have multiple concepts of your own identity.

My family looks a lot like Marinette's, so I couldn't help but see ways to connect the show to my daughters in particular. This is why this aspect of the show is so terribly important to me.

You're going to see me weave in bits and pieces of Chinese heritage and the immigrant experience in this story because it's such an important part of the MLB universe to me, even if it's not a focus in the show itself. Although I think I should acknowledge that I grew up in the US and have only lived abroad in Japan. I do have some experience being othered, but it's certainly not the same as what Sabine would've faced. I experienced racism there, but it was overwhelmingly positive racism, even if there's a persistent sense you will never *not* be an outsider.

The Chinese cultural parts of my story are a combination of what I learned from my friends from Taiwan growing up, some research I have put in on my own, my little bit of schooling in Mandarin, and the experiences of my in-laws.

If I could recommend one fic about this, it's the terrific (and sadly unfinished) Red for Fortune by Wrench_Wench. Microaggressions lead to Marinette's akumatization.

The Maternal Instinct

Chapter Summary

Sabine felt the low rumble of Tom's bedroom voice as he grumbled about *connards* and *enfoirés*. She had felt so *alone* these past few days. Tom was an amazing father, but he was also soft in the ways that only people who've never had to move across the globe were. They'd both struggled to get the love they needed growing up, but uprooting your entire life and fleeing to another country gave you a covetous desperation for predictability and buffers. She knew he was worried about Marinette, but she felt more worried. Maybe it was all in her head. But seeing him like this, expressing this protective instinct…she needed that closeness from him right now.

Sabine and Tom reflect on the newest events, Adrien pays the bakery a visit, Sabine gets counsel from her sister, and we finally meet Sabine's mother.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

Sabine and her sister speak Shanghainese, not Mandarin, with each other.

wei - 喂 - hello
non ho a me-me - 侬好啊妹妹 (hi, younger sister)
jiajia ho - 姐姐好 - (hi, big sister)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sabine lay in bed with her book and reading glasses while Tom stretched out his muscles after a long day of hard labor. On top of everything else, she didn't want to tell him about the delivery boy, but she didn't know how to talk to the supplier without it getting back to Tom. It was a good ol' boy network built off handshake deals, after all. And she would be better at softening the blow than if someone outside the family told him.

Maybe solving this problem would help calm her down about the rest of Marinette's problems. She looked up from her novel and peered at her husband over the edge of her reading glasses, taking in the blue veins interrupting the vast expanse of his forearm muscles like rivers carving their way through rough terrain.

The thought of rough terrain reminded her of her recent conversation with Marinette, about all the awful things she and her friends have had to endure—but also how *mature* her daughter seemed about it. Marinette had a wisdom that Sabine hadn't fully appreciated before.

And despite the weightiness of the topic, her daughter had been smiling by the end of their talk.

Maybe everything is okay. Maybe Marinette has it handled.

“Tom…I think we should give Marinette some space to figure things out. I think that sketch was just a sketch, and that nightmare was just a nightmare. She seemed her normal self today."

He paused his stretches and straightened up, leaning toward her. ”Are you sure? You seemed to feel the exact opposite yesterday.”

Wondering how to respond, a memory escaped from her lockbox and creeped back into her consciousness.

She trudged to her mother's and sister's house from school, every step harder to take than the last, her latest exam balled up in her fist. She popped her jacket collar and tugged at the buttons before readjusting her pack. She felt her brows pull together from the anxiety and wind.

Mama isn't gonna be happy.

February was her least favorite month, owing to the humid winds sweeping in off the bay. Normally, feeling chills in her bones was her body warning her that her mother was near, but when the weather felt like this, she had no advance notice.

So what else is new?

The magpies seemed to agree it was unseasonably cold, even though she was certain it was the fear, not the weather, slowing her blood flow and making her fingers feel like they couldn't flex.

She wished Baba was still around. But it had been years since she had poured water over his hands and cast lit candles beneath his casket. At least Uncle had taken her in when she was younger. Not even Mama had dared defy his parenting style since she was the outsider.

Uncle was her home. His hearth was always warm from his soup experiments. “Celestial” he called them. Whenever she had some, she felt like she was floating through the sky wrapped in a blanket.

But Uncle was in France at the moment, meeting with industry players. It seemed that, despite being the black sheep of the family, having refused to go into finance, he'd managed to find a way to make the family proud.

If only I could, too.

She arrived at her former house. The placard by the gate may have said “Cheng,” but it was really her mother Huang Meifen’s fiefdom. She walked in to find her mother in the kitchen. She was sharpening a cleaver with her back to Sabine. Beside her on the cutting board was a chicken she must have killed and plucked herself this morning. Sabine imagined her mother snapping its neck and shuddered.

It’s not a good day for metaphors.

Her mother was not much taller than her, but her absolute belief in her decisions reminded Sabine why her mother idolized Empress Wu. Even at home, she was dressed in smart attire with an apron over it. It was hard not to respect this woman of middling birth, who had clawed her way to the top of society just as China was liberalizing its economy, even if those same qualities made her ill-suited to be her mother. It didn't hurt that she'd married the son of a wealthy family with ties to Hong Kong.

Sabine gritted her teeth and placed her exam down on a nearby countertop.

But before she could say anything, her mother spoke up. "Xiabing, why am I hearing that you are up to no good in class?"

"What?" Sabine was taken aback. *This* fight wasn't what she'd prepared for.

"Your teacher called—"

"Why is he calling here?" Was her mouth drying out? It sure felt like it.

"I'm the backup contact when your uncle is abroad. Is there a problem with that?"

"N-no."

"No *what*?"

Sabine felt a coldness sweep up her arms and then down her chest, forming an ice-ball in her stomach. Once her mother got it in her head that something was true, there was no persuading her. Years of overhearing her mother's rants at Baba—until she'd been sent to live with Uncle—proved it. And, for now, there was nowhere to go.

It's no use.

"No, Mama."

"That's better. So why are you getting into fights?"

"I'm not!" How was it that every argument with her mother, she ended up feeling like a child?

"I can tell when you're lying."

A teakettle of piping hot resentment was being poured into the vessel of her body. She stomped her foot. "I'm not lying!"

Her mother waved her hand that held the cleaver. An empty hand might have felt dismissive, but one with that amount of cutting power… "You lie all the time! Where you're going, who you're with, what you're doing—"

Sabine grimaced, knowing exactly who was feeding her mother these lies. *The damn neighborhood snoop.*

"I do not! Madame Wong just hates me! *She's* the one lying to you. She's a busybody—"

"She has been a friend of the family for years, and she's just looking out for our interests." (Empress Wu had had her own network of spies, too.)

“She’s looking out for *your* interests.”

“My interests *are* our interests, daughter.”

“No, your interests are yours and *Me-me’s*! Your interests haven’t included me since you sent me to live with Uncle!”

“Well, I couldn’t keep both of you.” Her mother sounded like she was reading from a dictionary, and it was infuriating. There ought to be a base level of emotion at play in a conversation, and Sabine felt like she had to contribute enough for the both of them.

"Our family is rich enough! You could have paid the fines!”

“We didn't get where we are by throwing money away!”

And then, as pins pricked at the corners of her eyes, Sabine wished she didn’t have to feel anything anymore. *No, you just threw me away.*

As if the tears had traveled through time, she felt them forming at the corner of her eyes in the present. She closed her eyes and scrunched her face, re-compartmentalizing the memory.

She’s not here. She’s not here.

While she was lost in her reverie, Tom had slid under the covers and was sitting beside her with his hand on her shoulder. “Sabine, are you sure we should just trust what Marinette says?”

She opened her eyes only to find herself comforted by his forest-green gaze.

I’m not going to shovel my traumas onto Marinette.

She pursed her lips and nodded. “I’m certain."

Tom took a deep breath and sighed. "OK. I'll go along with you for now. But if things get worse..."

"Tom, if things get worse I'll fight whoever stands in my way of getting her out of the bad situation she’s in.” She began tapping her finger on the duvet, reassuring herself that she needed to tell Tom about this morning. “ Speaking of which…” She relayed what had happened earlier in the day.

As she expected, Tom was furious.

Visibly trembling, he growled. “That boy better not set foot in here again, or I’ll show *him* something exotic. Where does he get off—”

“I know.” She reached over and took his hand in hers. “She and I had a good talk, and not just about what happened. We also talked about what kinds of boys are worthy of her affection.”

He pulled his hand from hers and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, I’m not sure *any* boy is worthy of her affections.”

Sabine felt the low rumble of Tom's bedroom voice as he grumbled about *connards* and *enfoirés*. She had felt so *alone* these past few days. Tom was an amazing father, but he was also soft in the ways that only people who've never had to move across the globe were. They'd both struggled to get the love they needed growing up, but uprooting your entire life and fleeing to another country gave you a covetous desperation for predictability and buffers. She knew he was worried about Marinette, but she felt *more* worried. Maybe it was all in her head. But seeing him like this, expressing this protective instinct…she needed that closeness from him right now.

She leaned in and hummed. "Well, I know one boy who's worthy of *my* affections."

"O-oh?"

"You've always been there for me, Tom, from the day we met..."

Sabine scooted her hips closer to his side of the bed and rolled over, her hair dangling on his neck. She leaned into his warmth for a kiss, but there was a thudding noise coming from upstairs.

Her head lifted back instinctively as she rolled her eyes upward and listened.

Not hearing anything, and miffed due to the interruption, she moved back toward Tom. As traumatic as that night with the nightmare had been, when she looked at her husband's arms, she wanted that electricity she'd seen for *herself*.

But there was another loud thump, and she and Tom shot up in bed, almost knocking their heads together.

"You heard it, too?" Tom asked, concern palpable.

"I think so. Did that come from Marinette's room?"

He rushed out of bed and started for the door. "I'll go check it out. She probably just knocked something off her bed."

"Y-yeah, it's probably nothing."

The stairs creaked as he hurried up.

She waited a few minutes, trying to read her well-worn, favorite mystery novel.

It's nothing. It's got to be nothing.

There was no way someone had snuck past their room via the stairs. And the only people who could get to Marinette's room from above were a benevolent wonder-woman and a leather-wrapped hero who'd already declared his affections lay elsewhere.

It has to be nothing. Unless it's an akuma.

But it's nothing.

She'd sworn she would give Marinette space. This was just a test from the universe to make sure she'd meant it.

You aren't Mama.

She would read the same two sentences of her book, forget what her eyes had unfocused over, and restart the paragraph. As luck would not have it, she was at the part where the detective found the girl's body after having been killed by a jilted ex-lover.

No, no, no.

It was like her body was preventing her from absorbing the scene.

Finally, Tom returned. He looked…relaxed. Sabine breathed a sigh of relief.

You see? It really was nothing.

"Anything, honey?"

"No. I thought I heard Marinette whispering and some shuffling, but when I checked on her, she was working with her sewing machine. She was probably just on the phone with Alya when she heard her big, dumb dad approaching, and they stopped talking.

"I asked her what the sounds were, and she said she'd knocked over her dress form. I asked her if she'd heard the second thump, and she laughed and said I wouldn't believe how clumsy she'd been, but she'd knocked it over *twice*. I'm not sure if I believe her, but everything seemed in order." Tom grinned. "She's sneaky like her mother sometimes."

Sabine sighed with relief and then noticed the barb he'd pricked her with. "Oh, because we're both Chinese?"

Tom put his palm to his cheek and grinned as he slid completely under the covers. "No, because you're both women," came a muffled tease.

Sabine took her time running her finger along the page of her book. She dog-eared her novel, folded it closed, and then thwacked the approaching lump of covers. "I'll show you what women are like!"

"Please do!" Tom put his arms around Sabine's waist as she threw the covers off them.

As the heat reconquered the cold in her body, she placed her hands on either side of his face and leaned in to kiss him, gazing into his forest green eyes. She reached over and yanked on the lamp cord, leaving them both in the dark.

The next morning, Sabine ran through a tai chi form while standing behind the display cases. It helped her stay limber while on her feet all day. It also centered her at a time when she so desperately needed to feel grounded. There wasn't much of her mother's "lessons" that she'd kept putting into practice, but it was hard to forget the trauma of martial arts training. And it helped her process her feelings.

I should teach Marinette again. Give her the tools to fight off an attacker. There was no way Marinette would be able to fight off anything in her current state. And she always woke up so late.

She wondered if it was due to trauma—she wasn't sure she'd be able to sleep at all if she had to kiss someone to stop their assault.

She shuddered at her inadvertent slip-up. *Assault*.

Marinette bounded down the stairs, apologies already on her lips. "I'm sorry I overslept! I know I was supposed to be up and helping!"

Sabine tossed her daughter a washrag. "Just finish wiping things down. Mme Fournier was in here with her grandsons earlier, and they got raspberry jam fingerprints *everywhere*."

"Ugh. Okay."

Sabine went back and grabbed the broom and began to sweep the storefront. The bell above the door chimed, and she looked over to see who had come in. "Oh, Adrien, it's lovely to see you!"

From behind her where Marinette was came the sound of something soft thudding against the plasterboard and then the tile. Her daughter had fallen over and somehow gotten the dirty washrag covering her whole face.

Adrien rushed around the display counter to reach her. "Marinette, are you okay?" Sabine watched him slowly kneel down beside Marinette. Not for a moment did he look like he would laugh at her misfortune.

"What? Oh yes. Wow, I think I slipped on some of that jam." She removed the rag from her face and turned red. "A-Adrien! What are you doing here?" She shot back up on her feet like she'd been electrocuted.

"I'm here to pick up some pastries and then head over to Le Grand Paris to have lunch with Chloe."

"Oh, with Chloe?" Marinette's eyes seemed to unfocus for a moment.

"Yeah. You should've seen her yesterday. She was so mad I hadn't visited in a while. 'Adrikins, you are coming over tomorrow *or else*!' I tried to cheer her up, but it didn't work. I started crawling toward her like, 'Chloeeeeee!'" He started acting like a marionette being tugged by its strings toward her daughter. "Chloeeee, I need you!"

Adrien put his hand on Marinette's shoulder as if he were grabbing her to drag her away, and Marinette jerked away from his touch. He pulled his hand back as if slapped.

"Marinette?"

She hesitated before responding, and Sabine wondered about her daughter flinching.

"Oh, I'm fine. Adrien, that's so *funny*!" Marinette laughed, but Sabine could tell it was a bandage over an injury. "Here, let me help you with your order. O-our bakery is so out of the way for you!"

Sabine could hear the kind smile in Adrien's response. "I heard about what happened to you the other day. From Alya. Are you okay?"

Marinette looked at her feet. "Y-yeah. I just…you know how it is. With all these akumas. Oh, I *wish* Alya hadn't told you! I don't want to worry anyone."

Adrien looked hurt for a moment, but he quickly wiped that look off his face. He reached for her hand as if he wanted to give her reassurance, but he stopped himself before he grabbed her. “Um, may I hold your hand?” It was uncanny how perfectly he marked off all of Sabine’s checkboxes as a mother. He was patient, sympathetic, vulnerable, and someone must have taught him all about consent—likely his mother.

“Y-yes, you can. I mean, you may!”

Adrien took it gently, as if he were giving her more time to change her mind, just in case. “I’m glad she told me, Marinette. Sometimes I get scared, too, and it’s nice to know someone as strong as you has problems like I do.”

Marinette gawked at him. “S-strong like me?”

“My Everyday Ladybug, of course.”

A red swept across her daughter’s freckle-dotted cheekbones at this compliment, and she moved her wobbly hand to begin bagging his order.

Sabine stepped out of the room to think. Her legs *needed* to move. Standing still made her feel ineffectual.

She began pacing, thinking about the flinch. *What does it mean?*

After giving Marinette a few minutes with Adrien, she went back into the storefront to find her daughter alone, leaning against the glass, looking exhausted.

“Didn’t you just break the world record for hours slept?”

Marinette shot off the glass. “No! Yes? I’m trying to make it unreachable!”

Sabine approached her daughter slowly, thinking back to the nightmare and panic attack she’d witnessed. “What happened? You seemed to be doing fine until…well, until Adrien put his hand on you.”

Her daughter’s eyes shifted back and forth. “Oh, well, you know how I get around *Adrien*. I’m just a klutz.” She shrugged. “That’s the way it’s always going to be, I guess.”

Sabine didn’t believe that’s what the flinch was about, but she wanted to keep Marinette talking. “I know how hopeless you must feel about it. I used to be like that around your father.”

“What? But you and dad are so comfortable with each other. I can’t imagine you ever being so weird and clumsy around him!”

“Well, I was. He actually saved my life before we’d even met.”

Marinette smirked, but Sabine wasn’t sure why. “Oh, don’t tell me you saved Adrien’s life and the rest of us just never heard about it.”

“What? Noooo. Can you imagine me saving anybody? With my clumsiness? I just thought it was funny, the idea of dad saving you, when he’s such a teddy bear.”

“And I’m not?”

Marinette laughed. “No. You’re a tiger mom.”

“Hey!”

“Okay, okay. A tabby mom.”

“You aren’t much taller than I am, Marinette.”

“Yeah, but those three centimeters make a big difference!”

“That’s true, three centimeters is the difference between a mouse and a rat!”

“Hey!”

The two squinted at each other for a moment, a high-noon standoff in a Western film, before the façades cracked and they began giggling.

“Come on, let’s finish getting that mess of jam cleaned up.”

Marinette picked up the rag that she’d had on her face earlier. “Sure thing, *Maman*.”

That night, Sabine called her sister, the one person who might understand what she was going through—trying to navigate *not* becoming her mother.

Her sister answered. “*Wei*?”

“*Non ho a, Me-me.*”

“*Jiajia ho*. How are things?”

Sabine paused, not knowing how to answer. Or even how to bring up her troubles. Mama had never equipped her with the ability to *rely on people*.

“*Jiajia*, are you there?”

It was like a dam burst. “I think I’m failing Marinette!” Sabine started crying. “Something’s going on with her and she won’t tell me, but she’s so jumpy around everyone, and she’s freaking out at the drop of a hat—and there’s this picture she drew, and I’m afraid, and I don’t know what’s going on, but I need to know, and—and every bone in my body is telling me to lock her up until she comes clean, but I *just can’t turn int—”*

“*Jiajia*!”

Her sister was trying to calm her down, but now that she had the momentum, she wasn’t going to let up. Self-flagellation was, in the end, the only way she knew to bare her soul to people. “The other night, she woke up from a terrible nightmare. It was horrible. She was screaming so loud that I thought a man was attacking her up in her bedroom. She told me she was fine, and I believed her. Then she had a panic attack on the streets. A cupid cosplayer triggered some bad emotional reaction, and then today she was talking to Adrien—the boy she has a crush on—and as soon as he touched her shoulder, she flinched back so fast, and I don’t know what’s going on. She keeps

telling me she's fine, but I'm about ready to lock her up until I can make sure there isn't someone threatening her!"

Sabine gulped in air after that long speech.

"Oh, *Jiajia*, I'm so sorry you have to go through that. It has to be so tough." Sabine could hear the hesitation in her sister's voice. Meilin had never been one for sharing her struggles, and she wasn't very good at expressing empathy, either. "I remember when Bridgette was first a teenager, we didn't get along at all. Fights all the time. She was sneaking out, and I ended up stalking her social media accounts trying to figure out who she was still friends with, if she was seeing a boy, what she was interested in. It hurt so bad."

Sabine could understand this feeling. She remained silent, taking advantage of her sister's uncharacteristic openness. "And you know I couldn't tell Mama. She would've hopped a plane and laid down the law on her. Probably torching the whole family in the process."

"But Bridgette talks to you now, right?"

"Yes, she does." Sabine could tell from the tone of her sister's voice that she was trying not to rub it in her face.

"What did you do? Did your struggles resolve themselves?"

"Well, after a month where she refused to even speak to me, I pulled her out of school for the day and I took her to a spa so she couldn't get away, and couldn't use her phone. We had cupping done, we got facials—"

"A facial got her to open up?"

"I framed it as a reward for how hard she'd been working at school. But really it was to trap her so she had to talk to me."

"Did she figure out what you were doing?"

"She did, and she was *so* mad at me. There was a lot of screaming on both sides. The poor attendant at the spa. It's such bad luck to get between two Cheng women when they're angry."

"So how was this a *good* thing?"

"Bridgette got everything off her chest that she'd been holding in, and our relationship has been better ever since. The root of a lot of it was actually about Mama. I didn't know it, but she'd been talking to Bridgette behind my back whenever she'd visit, trying to 'encourage' her—"

"You mean 'threaten' her."

"*Cajole* her about her future career path. You know, that whole spiel of, 'I was nothing, dragged our family into the elite, do not let us backslide, yada yada.' Bridgette was angry I wasn't standing up for her. And once she told me, I told Mama to back off. Done."

Done.

That sounds nice. I want that.

Sabine ran her palm across her face and looked up, sighing, before drawing her fingers around her neck, pulling back the skin. “Do you ever feel like you aren’t doing enough for Bridgette?”

“All the time. You and me, we didn’t have the best role model. And unlike you, I still have the privilege of receiving our mother’s criticism. Speaking of which, why don’t you take some of that money Mama sent you—”

“You know about that? I haven’t touched that since it got here.”

“*Jiajia*, Who do you think told Mama to send it? She called me one day, railing about how she didn’t know anyone in Paris to talk to about an investment, and I reminded her she had a bloody daughter in town. I suggested she write you a letter or something, to try to patch things up, and she said she’d just send some money.”

Sabine was taken aback. “Mama thought she could just send me some money and everything would be okay? Do you *know* the last thing she said to me?”

“…Yes.”

“I *knew* it was a bad idea not to send it back right away. Now she probably thinks everything’s forgiven because I held onto it. Well, I definitely can’t use it now!”

Meilin sighed. “That woman. She and I may be in the same line of work, but we don’t think alike at all. Probably because of your good influence, when you were around.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I wasn’t around that much.”

“You stood up to Mama when it counted. She went a lot easier on me than you, in no small part because of how you two ended things.” Sabine heard her sister clicking her tongue, a tell-tale sign she was trying to solve a problem. “Don’t send the money back. Use it, but keep her away from Marinette. That way, there won’t be any strings explicitly attached to the money. Take Marinette for a mother-daughter spa day. They won’t let her take her phone in. She won’t be able to escape you, either. And she won’t even realize it’s a setup until it’s too late.”

Sabine began imagining how this trip might go. Sabine would apologize for being smothering. Marinette would take the hint and apologize for shutting her out. They would patch things up.

Yes. That’ll fix things.

Sabine grinned. “Alright, I’ll try it. What would I do without your demonic influence, *Me-me*?”

“Sit at home, letting more of that ghastly vanilla odor soak into your skin?”

Sabine giggled. “Someone’s jealous!”

The line went dead. It’d been a while since she’d teased her her sister into silence! Sabine opened her phone’s browser and began looking for a good place for a massage.

I have a plan.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest, I'm hitting a real big patch of impostor syndrome right now with this story. If I didn't have UpTooLateArt and RaspberryCatapult beta reading this story for me, y'all, I do not know what would be going on right now. I've drawn so much confidence from them, and any hesitation I have, I just plaster over it by reminding myself not to let them down.

I'm at the month mark since ch1 dropped, and I'm feeling SENTIMENTAL, okay? The level of effort UpTooLateArt has put in, helping me with my story for MONTHS now. I'm not kidding that this was a 40K word story before I passed it off to her to read it the first time. It's 75% longer. And yes, those words came from my fingers. But not all of them. And not all of the ideas. And I have this natural inclination to inject humor and levity into my characters that sometimes is inappropriate, and having these things get called out has made this story that much better.

I gotta tell you, she and RaspberryCatapult are putting out some great work of their own, and they're both busy people (just look at their Ao3 work list right now!), and yet they've helped me. It's so meaningful to me.

But OKAY! On to author's notes about the chapter itself!

I had an expansive plan of Sabine's sister's family coming to stay at the boulangerie, including Marinette's cousins (yes, originally I'd planned that she had multiple cousins in London!). This was going to be a linguistic feast, because I'd constructed all these headcanons about why Marinette was learning Mandarin to talk to her Uncle in Kung Food even though the family is from Shanghai, where there's another dialect that would've been very widespread when Sabine's uncle was growing up. The original reason, which led to my invention of her mother the way she is, was that Sabine wanted to leave her old life behind her, and that started with abandoning her mother tongue.

But the visiting family plotline was a distraction from the core mother-daughter story, and I LOVE reading about good parent-child relationships in the MLB fandom.

A note about Empress Wu. She was a great leader, and the only empress regnant (i.e., an empress who actually ran the country) in Chinese history. Highly-educated, she was a concubine who used every tool at her disposal to rise in the ranks and eventually, when her husband became emperor and then incapacitated and died, she took over rather than one of her sons taking over. And she led the country toward greater prosperity over her fifteen-year reign. So, to me, the woman I created to be Sabine's mother would absolutely obsess over this empress, and have a drive to be successful, too.

Also, I allude to it in the flashback, but when I created my timeline for Sabine's life, it just barely worked out in the timeline that Sabine was born when China's One Child Policy was in effect. There were exceptions to the rule (like if your first child was a daughter, you could try for a second), but I don't think that exception existed from the outset. If I have that bit of history wrong, then let's say I'm taking a little creative liberty.

If you had multiple children, then under this policy you had fines/fees you were required to pay. That's what Sabine and Meifen are talking about in the flashback.

--

If you have criticism about the story, I would like to read it! I didn't study this stuff in school (I studied math!), so I'm not going to be hurt if there's something I'm doing wrong.

And a reminder, if there is a mother you'd like this fic to be dedicated to, let me know! I'll add them to the gift list! (And upon request, I will remove them.)

Healing Hands

Chapter Summary

Marinette's gaze had once again drifted back to the man in the Metro uniform. Sabine let her gaze linger on him, on his thin brown eyebrows and aquiline nose. At the way he stared at a black family talking happily with each other. Then she recognized him, and she realized what was going on.

Qilin. She's thinking about Qilin.

Shortly after her akumatization, this man had disappeared from their bus route. She figured he'd been transferred, but it appeared he'd found a new, better job. It was so typical, guys like this fucking up and falling up the ladder. The irony of *him* working so close to the Mandarin Oriental was not lost on her.

Sabine and Marinette take a trip to the spa for some rest, relaxation, and honest conversation.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Mystic_Raven20 for the spa idea. I mentioned to her back about five months ago that I was trying to come up with a mother-daughter bonding activity bc it "can't all be angst," and almost immediately she suggested a spa. This was my reaction:

Then I ran with the idea. Blame her for it! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After she'd finished booking spa time for her and Marinette, Sabine fired off a message to Alya asking her to take notes for Marinette the following day at school. Then she headed upstairs to tell her daughter about the "reward" for all her hard work.

She climbed up the ladder to Marinette's room and knocked on the hatch. "Marinette, I have something to talk to you about."

She waited for a response, but none came. So she knocked again. "Marinette? Are you awake?"

Still nothing.

She pushed open the hatch. The light was on, but she didn't hear anyone moving around. She shot a glance at the rooftop access panel as she finished the climb, but it was closed.

Emerging into the room, she turned around. Marinette was passed out on her chaise longue, arms thrown awkwardly like she'd fallen asleep mid-yawn, knitting needles and yarn scattered on the ground beneath her. There was a trail of drool beating a path from the corner of her mouth to her ear.

Sabine's eyes crinkled with joyful familiarity, remembering early postpartum days at home, recovering and taking care of her new baby. Leading up to delivery day, she'd *known* that of all the baby fluids, dealing with poop would be by far the worst—especially since Marinette would be on an all-liquid diet, so it would be very runny. She'd coached herself up so she didn't throw up at the sight.

But she was wrong! Yes, poop was smelly, but it wasn't really that big of a deal if you got it on you. Keep calm and wipe it off. Pee? Basically warm water. It didn't even stink.

But drool was *disgusting*. She hadn't expected how gross she would find it when a babbling, happy Marinette would blow spit bubbles that dripped down her chin and onto Sabine's cheeks and neck.

And here her teenager was, giving an unconscious master class in drool physics. But now that Sabine wasn't on the receiving end of a wayward drip, she found it endearing.

She tiptoed toward her daughter to make her more comfortable. Marinette was a spry fourteen, so bad sleep posture wouldn't affect her the next morning at all.

On her way, Sabine picked up off the floor a Chat Noir-themed blanket Marinette had made.

Always something on the floor.

Marinette stirred, and Sabine froze for a moment, hoping not to wake her. Then she continued her approach, quiet as a mouse. She reached out to sweep Marinette's loose hair off her forehead, and —

"It's me…" Marinette whispered.

Oh, how cute. She's talking in her sleep.

"That's me…"

Sabine wondered what this dream was about. She imagined Marinette was sitting at a mirror, makeup and hair done for her debut fashion show, astonished at her own beauty in this imaginary future.

Yes, it's you, Meiyun!

"We can be friends," her daughter continued.

The moment felt absolutely magical, like when she'd sat up late watching over baby Marinette, smiling as her daughter would giggle in her sleep or stick her tongue out like she was dreaming of latching onto a nipple.

"Mmmm, habbybirday to you…"

This triggered a memory of Marinette at three years old in February, parading around the bakery, yelling, "*Konsheefazehh!"* at all the customers who tried to buy something for Lunar New Year. It was one of the only memories Sabine had of her daughter speaking Shanghainese before the painful realization that she wouldn't pick up the language without more family around. And there would never be more family around.

"…Sentibug…"

Sabine didn't know what this meant, but of course people spoke nonsense in their dreams.

"No…don't kill her…don't! No!" Marinette had tensed up in her sleep.

Sabine scrunched up her face, dread clustering in her muscles. What new secrets were about to be teased but not revealed?

Kill her?

She had just convinced herself a trip to the spa would fix everything, and now *murder*?

She collected her nerves off the ground and reassured herself. *Everyone has nightmares, and they don't have to mean anything.*

Repeating this prayer of petition, she managed to convince her body to believe it, and the tension left her face.

Sabine knelt down and pressed her nose to her Marinette's cheek. "Shhhh, shhhh, it's okay, *Baobei*…your mommy's here. You're safe. And so is your friend…"

Her daughter hiccupped and sighed, the tension in her body melting away. And then her eyes fluttered open.

"*Maman*?"

Sabine sat back, trying to draw Marinette's anxiety away with the movement. She gave her daughter a tender, reassuring smile. "You fell asleep on your sofa, baby. And you were having a nightmare again."

"Oh, but it ended so nicely." Marinette looked confused, but she smiled as she stretched her arms and legs, twisting and twitching her body with happiness.

"Oh? Was your friend okay?"

For a moment, Marinette looked wistful and disappointed, but the sadness was gone as soon as it had arrived, like Mama on special birthdays. Her daughter answered, "Yeah. Well, it was, um, Bridgette. And I thought someone was going to hurt her. But then suddenly we were okay, and she came home with me, and we were like a family." She pursed her lips before continuing. "Does that make sense? I know my dreams don't make a lot of sense sometimes…"

"I'm just glad it got a happy ending." Sabine hugged Marinette, who melted into the embrace.

"Yeah, happy…"

Her daughter trembled in her arms, clutching the back of Sabine's shirt as hot tears were transferred to her neck where Marinette's face rested.

The next morning, Sabine made sure to occupy space between the stairs and the front door so she couldn't miss Marinette dashing out to go to school. She'd brought a chair out and sat down with a book. In all the emotion of last night, she'd forgotten to tell Marinette what they were doing today!

Sabine looked up from her tea when she heard her daughter bounding down the steps. She rounded the landing and came into view. Marinette had bags under her eyes, a broad smile plastered over what was otherwise an exhausted face.

Another nightmare after I left?

Sabine laughed. "My, my, Marinette, aren't we up early?"

Her daughter nearly missed a step, but grabbed the railing and settled her feet. "*Maman*! You scared me! What are you doing sitting in the stairwell?"

She was so *excited* to take Marinette for a relaxing day out. Thankfully, she'd managed to reach one of their seasonal employees who had stopped by last week admitting to needing a little extra pocket money for dates with his new girlfriend.

But the appointment she'd booked wasn't until later. "Given how early it is, I could ask you the same thing."

"Well, you know, I just wanted to start the day off on the right foot! So much to do, so much!" She performed a fake jogging motion with exaggerated hand movements, tipping a bit on the nose of one of the steps before re-balancing. "Hehe! Me and Alya and Nino and Adrien have a group project we're kicking off in the library before school today!"

Sabine's heart sank, and she put her hand to her chest.

How can she lie like that?

She had messaged Alya first thing this morning to tell her she was surprising Marinette with a spa session and to ask her to take notes at school. Alya had initiated a video call right away, declaring that if it meant Marinette got to take a break, Sabine had her full support. (Alya could always be trusted in a pinch.) But the girl hadn't mentioned anything about a group project!

"Take notes for Marinette? Not much difference from the usual, Mme C!"

"What do you mean, Alya? You normally take notes for Marinette?"

Alya sucked in a breath. "No! Of course *not! She's very diligent. She and I take turns with notes to give our hands a break. Mlle Mendeleiev is all talk talk talk! So much to write down! We started doing it a couple weeks ago because we were getting hand cramps!"*

"Okay… Well, so long as she's not imposing on you all the time… Marinette has to learn to be responsible. You're not going to be in class with her forever."

"Absolutely, couldn't agree more! But yes, I will take notes for her. No problem! It sounds like you two are going to have a nice day out. She deserves it. You both deserve it!"

Sabine cleared her throat. “Actually, Marinette, I already called the school, and I'm treating you to a spa day today!”

Not only did Marinette not seem happy to hear this, but she looked nervous. But Sabine blinked her eyes *once*, and all that was left on her daughter’s face was gratitude. There wasn’t a trace of worry remaining.

“R–really? A spa day?!” Marinette fiddled with her backpack straps, scraping her thumbnails along the inside of the shoulder pads.

Sabine continued, undeterred. “I think you could use some relaxation, and I miss getting to talk to you."

“That’s…” Marinette took a deep breath, examining the tips of her shoes, like she was reminding herself of something. She looked up and made eye contact with Sabine again. “That’s so nice of you. Thank you! I could certainly use a break. Why not? It’ll be fun!”

Sabine wiggled her eyes at her daughter. “And it’s posh, too.”

Only excitement was left on Marinette’s face. “Really? That’s great! Umm, when did you want to get going?"

"Why don't we shoot for 10? That will give us plenty of time to get there. Go back to bed until then, sweetie. You look like you could use some more sleep.”

"Thank you so much!" Marinette gave Sabine a tight hug and then leapt back upstairs.

Right at ten, Sabine and Marinette sat down on the Metro. Sabine had tried to look “chill,” but she was certain Marinette knew she was up to something. So far neither of them had brought it up.

Sabine started reading over her emails, repeating “nonchalant” to herself in an effort to appear so. "How is your internship going? Your father and I never hear much about it, but we’re so excited for you and want to share in your joy.”

Marinette bounced in her seat and kicked her legs, her pigtails swinging. “Oh! Well, um, Nathalie is *so* intense, and Mr Agreste rides everyone hard…but I'm grateful for the chance, and I do enjoy the work. I mean, it’s not what I expected, but it’s still a ridiculous opportunity!” Marinette looked at her and raised her eyebrows, smirking. “And I still can’t believe *they pay me*. I have *actual money* from Gabriel Agreste!”

Sabine closed her eyes and luxuriated in her daughter’s enthusiasm. It was the emotional massage she needed right now. “Yes, that’s very nice, sweetie. But what *did* you expect before you started?”

When Marinette didn’t respond, Sabine opened her eyes again. "Marinette?"

Her daughter was now fidgeting and looking forward at a Metro employee aboard their car. Sabine put her hand on her daughter's shoulder.

Marinette jumped at the touch and snapped her head back to her. “What? Did you say something?”

“I just asked what you expected…”

“Oh. I'm not really sure. I knew this wasn’t a real opportunity—that Adrien convinced Nathalie to let me follow her around…but I think I had a vague idea that I'd be designing things, even if they were all going to end up in the trash.”

“Well, you’re only fourteen. You have so much more to learn. Don't take it as an insult.”

Marinette's gaze had once again drifted back to the man in the Metro uniform. Sabine let her gaze linger on him, on his thin brown eyebrows and aquiline nose. At the way he stared at a black family talking happily with each other. Then she recognized him, and she realized what was going on.

Qilin. She's thinking about Qilin.

Shortly after her akumatization, this man had disappeared from their bus route. She figured he’d been transferred, but it appeared he’d found a new, better job. It was so typical, guys like this fucking up and falling up the ladder. The irony of *him* working so close to the *Mandarin Oriental* was not lost on her.

Sabine put her phone away, sat up straight, and pulled her mouth into a smile to disguise her grim feelings. She watched her daughter, trying to emit compassion and love that Marinette could absorb through the air. Trying to forget her own humiliation at this brute’s hands.

When Marinette rested her head her shoulder, Sabine relaxed. And until they reached their destination, she let Marinette just be.

”Sweetie, we're here.” Sabine gently shook her daughter to wake her up.

Marinette lifted her head off Sabine’s shoulder. “Hmm? Oh, okay.”

They grabbed their things and walked through the aisle. Sabine kept her focus on *him*. As she walked by, she smiled severely and looked him dead in the eye, channeling her mother’s imperiousness. He seemed to melt backward into the wall as she strode past him, out the door, and alighted on Place de la Madeleine.

They began walking toward the Boulevard de Capucines. Marinette was skipping, with a broad smile on her face. Undoubtedly she was looking forward to passing through the doors of the enormous glass wall that made up the façade of their destination. “Maman, I still can't believe you booked us time at the Mandarin Oriental! How can we afford this?”

Sabine sat at the dinner table alone, shocked. Before her sat a distended hongbao*. Five minutes ago, it had been stuffed with crisp, large-denomination Euros. She hadn’t counted the money yet,*

but it had to be over—

No. She couldn't accept it. She should return the red envelope. Retour à l'envoyeuse. *There were probably invisible strings attached.*

She examined it again. The opening had small tears, as if someone had stuffed it quickly. Nerves, or due to a lack of care? The latter.

Sabine snorted. Her mother certainly never took the time for her, so why Marinette?

There was a note in Chinese accompanying the hongbao. *"For Meiyun's needs." Definitely lack of care. She'd never even met her granddaughter. Why the sudden change? And what did Mama expect her to buy Marinette with all this money? A brand new car? Hah. She still couldn't get over the fact Gina thought a motorcycle was an appropriate gift for a fourteen-year-old.*

Had Mama heard about Marinette getting lost in Shanghai? It was all over the news there. She'd never gotten a call checking in on Marinette, so…

She hadn't wanted to touch the money. But, caught between a rock and a hard place, Sabine had thrown herself at the rock and hoped for the best.

"Oh, your father and I have some money squirreled away for special occasions, like your Shanghai trip 'to get in touch with your roots.'" She gave her daughter a knowing look. "And you're important to us. You've seemed so stressed lately, between your leadership duties at school, your commissions, your internship, and whatever else you get up to with Alya...*or Adrien*."

"*Maman*! You know it's not like that! ...and I don't think it ever will be."

"Oh, nonsense. I know your father is more of the gushing type, and I don't say it enough. My Chinese friends joke that a parent doesn't say, 'I love you,' unless they're dying. But you're a real catch, sweetie." She gave her a little pat on the cheek as they turned onto Rue Saint-Honoré.

"...not for someone like Adrien—"

"*Especially* for someone like Adrien."

Marinette was silent for a moment. "I don't understand what you mean by that."

Sabine clicked her tongue. "Oh, honey, I know Paris doesn't always make us feel welcome, but sometimes it seems like the whole city revolves around you and you're the only one who doesn't notice."

Marinette seemed to shudder at the thought, as if it were too true for her own liking. "I'm just a normal girl."

"Well, I don't think so. Neither does your father. Neither does Clara Nightingale. Neither does Jagged Stone. Neither does Gabriel Agreste. *And neither does Adrien*."

Marinette fiddled with her fingers, appearing to consider what Sabine had said. "What if I've...changed targets?"

Sabine snorted. "Oh, you mean Chat Noir?”

Marinette began stammering and nearly tripped.

“Hah! Oh, don't try to deny it, I've heard you passionately defend him to Alya when she talks about how that fox hero should replace him. I'd be careful if I were you, Marinette. He seems like a bit of a playboy.”

Marinette furrowed her brows but didn't disagree.

She must be more tired than I thought. Sabine had been so certain she'd respond to that level of teasing.

There was a lull in the conversation, and Sabine began to pick at her nails. *Better to do it now than on the massage table.* “Marinette, I'm so sorry you had to see me akumatized like that.”

“What?”

“You kept looking at that Metro guy today, and it was the ticket inspector from the day I was akumatized. You were thinking about Qilin, right?”

“…yes.”

Sabine looked down at her feet and counted the cracks they walked over, avoiding each one, struggling with how to talk to her daughter about this. When Marinette was younger, Sabine had agonized over “the talk”—that there were always going to be people in her birth country who saw her as a foreigner. But the first time Marinette came home from *élémentaire* crying that some kids had made fun of her ‘smelly food,’ she knew she’d waited too long. And she was still waiting too long.

Not anymore.

”When I first came to Paris, I wasn't made to feel welcome."

Marinette was looking intensely into her eyes now.

"I traveled around with Uncle, helping him out with his networking and training, but I usually stayed inside our apartment when I wasn't going to French classes. When I did go out, I felt like everyone was staring at me. Sure, Paris has had Chinese immigrants for a long time, but we've never been allowed to feel French—corralled off where Parisians who can't afford to fly to China come to gawk at our culture. Even just walking to French classes, I'd get catcalls. And not the ‘nice kind.’”

"*Maman*, why are you telling me this?"

"I just...I think a lot about the times Uncle and I were akumatized. Neither of us were at our best. I know what people were saying after Kung Food. ‘Chinese are hardworking robots who can't handle criticism.’ We're closed-off. We don't try to assimilate. And it was the same *shit* after Qilin. And did Hawkmoth really have to make us look like stereotypes? Paris never *lets* us assimilate.

“Look at Chloe Bourgeois. She didn't come up with that stuff on her own about how Uncle should just make sushi. And don't think I don't notice when she says your name how she emphasizes the ‘Cheng.’ She's learning that type of behavior at home. And her mom isn't around, so she hears it

from the mayor. The largest Chinese expat community in Europe, and his *well-educated* daughter can't even tell Japan from China, even when she has a Chinese girl in her class who's done reports for Heritage Day."

"…Yeah…"

Marinette's quiet agreement broke her heart.

She'd always tried to shield her daughter from the ugliness in Paris. But Hawkmoth had put it front and center. It was hard enough to pretend you weren't being treated unfairly because of your skin; but to have that disdain twisted into murderous intent that then triggered more racist invective?

Paris was where Sabine's heart lay ever since she met Tom. Not even Mama's lectures about the family's legacy in finance had justified Paris in her eyes before him.

But sometimes the City of Love didn't act like it, and those were the times she wished she could take Marinette (and Tom) away. *But to where?* Shanghai certainly would never be an option. Too many bad memories.

Her daughter shook her head and giggled. "Screw Chloe. She's gonna wear clothes with my name on them one day."

Sabine reached for Marinette's hand and squeezed, nodding with a grin. "That's our secret. We Cheng women endure."

At the spa, they were told to leave their phones behind in lockers. Marinette protested, and Sabine was a little disappointed in her daughter for being so clingy with the thing. It would only be a couple hours; she could go without Alya for that long. She just wanted some time with her daughter.

An attendant handed them two robes and left.

Marinette turned to Sabine, looking sick. "You have to get naked for a massage?"

Sabine cursed herself. In all her excitement about Meilin's promises of a revitalization of the mother-daughter bond, she'd completely forgotten about Marinette's reaction to Adrien's touch. And the panic attack. And the nightmare.

She smiled back at Marinette, trying to reassure her. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Of course you don't have to! I almost forgot what it was like at your age. You know, after months of being poked and prodded while I was pregnant with you, having doctors and nurses down *there* when I gave birth, and months of taking my breasts out in public to feed you, I kind of stopped caring so much. It's just that it's harder for the masseuse to work your muscles if there's clothes in the way."

Marinette began tugging at her fingers. "O-oh. I didn't think about that."

"You can keep your underwear on. That's what I used to do. If you've got a knot in your back, they can slide their hands under your bra strap or unfasten it, if that's okay."

How could I be so careless? You're so stupid, Sabine!

“Marinette, we don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

Her daughter looked at her in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Well…I wanted to treat you to something special today, but I’d forgotten about your nightmares, and about how skittish you seem to be about being touched right now.”

Marinette set her jaw, fire in her eyes. “No. You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m fine. I *promise.* This will be nice.” The flame dimmed a bit. “I just, um, don’t want to break any rules, you know?”

Sabine considered her daughter’s determination. “If you’re sure, hon—”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. But remember that if there’s some place you don’t want them to touch you, you can tell them.”

Her daughter nodded. “Yes, yes. I understand. Just don’t look, okay?”

Sabine smiled, remembering when Marinette was a toddler and she ran around the bakery after hours pressing her naked butt to the display glass, snickering about “buns for sale”? *Silly Tom teaching her those things.* “I promise.”

After changing, they exited the locker room and met up with the attendant, who ushered them into the massage room. Marinette scanned the area.

"Marinette, is something wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You looked around the room, like you were looking for something specific.”

"Oh! Hah, well, we've had so many akuma attacks at school that I guess it's become second nature to make sure I know where the exits are."

“Oh.” Sabine was shocked to hear this, but it *did* make sense. And it gave her a sense of relief that her daughter was circumspect about danger. ”Are all of your friends like that?"

"Alya for sure. Adrien, too, come to think of it. We actually were joking about it the other day, that someone's going to think we're up to no good if we keep it up.” Marinette looked sheepish. “I was trying to be subtler this time."

"Well, I *am* your mother. I notice more about you than you think."

A flicker of a smile crossed Marinette's face. “Hm. I suppose that's true, *Maman*. You're *very* perceptive.”

Once the attendant left, Sabine continued explaining how the spa worked. Then they fell into a comfortable silence as they waited.

Their masseuses knocked, and—true to her word—Sabine didn't look over. She heard a nervous sigh, then the robe drop, and some brief rustling, which must have been Marinette shuffling under the sheet. She herself casually climbed onto the table.

Sabine closed her eyes as her masseuse began kneading out the tension in her back. Amid the murmuring and small instructions passed between clients and workers, Sabine and Marinette managed to have a conversation.

"I was talking to your auntie last week, and she told me that Bridgette has been admitted to read economics at Cambridge. Can you believe it? The first Cheng girl in Britain, and she's into Oxbridge!"

"Good for her! But, come on, they're *rich*. Do people like that ever get turned down?" Marinette hummed with pleasure, obviously enjoying the massage. "I'm not saying she doesn't deserve it, but…okay, I'm jealous. I hope in a few years Auntie will be telling her about me getting into ESMOnnnnghh…"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine! I felt some muscle tension, like, quiver and melt away. Ohhh this feels amazing…"

"That's good, sweetie." Sabine felt herself relaxing under the hands of her masseuse. She carried so much stress around her shoulders from being hunched over at the table managing the financials, lugging around heavy deliveries, working the cash register, and even helping Tom bake in a pinch. She laughed. *Rolland would love to hear that our records aren't digital.*

She heard more relaxed sounds coming from beside her, and Sabine said a silent prayer of thanks for her sister's advice.

"Speaking of school, how do you feel about your studies this semester so far? You always have those last-minute projects you've got to run off and do with Alya, but I never hear whether your teachers liked the results."

"Oh, uh, well a lot of them are small things Miss Bustier asks us to work on. Everyone knows I've worked with Jagged Stone and am at *Gabriel* now, and Alya is famous now for her blog, so I think she's trying to get us more mature. She doesn't grade the work. She just talks to us about it, yeah, so…Oh, not there, please."

"What?"

"Oh, I was just talking to…what was your name again?"

"Esme," answered her masseuse. "And that's Charlotte."

"I was just talking to Esme."

"I'm sorry, are you Marinette Dupain-Cheng?" Sabine's own masseuse interjected.

"Oh! Um, yes?"

"Wow, that's so cool! There's a few of us Jagettes who work here, and we just *can't* get over the fact that Pajama Girl and Jagged Stone's designer are the same person!"

“Ehehe, yeah, that’s me! Oh, no not in that area either. It’s a little too sore.”

“Pajama Girl?” Sabine asked through the face hole in the table.

“Yeah, from that time me and Adrien—”

“I figured as much! I just didn’t realize you were the subject of gossip! I’m surprised Mr Agreste hasn’t tried to take advantage of that kind of notoriety. You know, have you model PJs with some kind of amateur aesthetic…Pajama Girl-Endorsed!” She couldn’t help but giggle at her own joke.

“I don’t think the Gabriel aesthetic includes wearing a towel on your head in publi—I SAID DON’T TOUCH ME THERE!”

Sabine shot up and turned to Marinette in time to see her daughter, wide-eyed and jerking the sheet upward toward her throat, wrapping an arm around her waist, cinching the drape to cover everything below her neck. She caught a glimpse of enormous bruises up and down her daughter’s chest and shoulders.

Every alarm bell in Sabine’s head was going full tilt, overriding rational thought. She felt like when Frozer had conjured a blizzard throughout Paris, his chilled vengeance rending doors from hinges, invading the bakery. Her limbs were frigid even as they propelled her off the massage table.

The masseuse spoke up. “I’m so sor—”

“Marinette! Where did you get those bruises?!” Sabine shrieked. The welts she saw strafed her mind with unbidden images of a vicious, white-masked face as she rolled off the table and rushed toward her daughter.

“No! Stay back! I’m okay! Stay back!” Marinette was panting as she kicked at Sabine’s outstretched hands.

Sabine pulled up short and backed off, though each of her neurons screeched in unison that she needed to take her daughter home, shackle her to the radiator, and blockade the door so no one could lay a hand on her.

“Okay! Okay! Marinette, calm down!” Esme and her coworker had backed away toward the wall, exchanging awkward looks. “Could you two ladies give us a moment?”

The two masseuses quickly left the room, Esme tossing one more apology over her shoulder as they vacated.

Sabine backed up. “Marinette, it’s okay, I’m backing away. You see?”

Marinette had an exhausted look in her eyes, and she clutched the sheet to her body like a second skin, like she was wrapping herself in cellophane to stay preserved. “Y-yeah.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m giving you space and not going to touch you, and you’re safe. It’s just me, your mother, who loves you very much.”

Marinette obscured her terror with a veil of frustration. “Oh my God, I’m okay! She just hit a tender spot!” She growled at Sabine. “And can you cover yourself up? You’re gonna traumatize me!”

But Sabine could see beyond her daughter's nervous attempts to conceal. With every shudder of the drape Marinette was using to hide the truth, like a shroud haphazardly tossed over a corpse, Sabine *knew*.

But she couldn't decide whether to challenge her daughter now on this obvious lie. It was like viewing a solar eclipse through a pinhole. Without peering into the sun and risking damage, she'd only be taking in a distorted projection of the truth. "But those bruises—"

"I fell down the stairs at school. You know how clumsy I am!"

Sabine froze. *How many times do women use that excuse?*

She agonized over what the truth might be. Something had happened, and she'd lost Marinette's trust. How could she get it back? *She needed it back!*

But again, thoughts of the broken relationship with her mother invaded her mind, and Sabine caved, deciding not to press the issue. She knew full well what too much aggressive mothering could lead to.

A single, treacherous tear escaped her eye and trickled down her face. "I'm sorry, *Baobei*. I just got so worried for you!"

Marinette's smile was fragile, that of a porcelain figurine balanced precariously at the edge of a flimsy table. She was still pallid around the eyes. "Thanks, but I'm okay! Now, do you want to call the ladies back in and get relaxed again?"

Sabine eyed her daughter, wondering whether to let her pretend like no secrets had been spilled today, or to make sure she wouldn't get triggered further. She sighed. "I want what you want."

"Well, you did spend all that money…"

"Forget the money. We came here today for our well-being, not to get a bargain. If I wanted to save money, I would've taken us to a place where they *speak* Mandarin, not one where 'Mandarin' is plastered on the building."

Marinette shot her the grin of a child who thought she'd gotten away with something. "Wellll...my forearms *are* pretty sore from all the sewing I've been doing…"

"Okay, then I guess we're staying." Sabine threw her robe back on and peeked out into the hall to find Charlotte, looking like she'd chided an embarrassed Esme the whole time they were out there.

The two women shuffled back in with her and they resumed the massages. But Sabine never heard Marinette sigh with pleasure again.

Chapter End Notes

"it can't all be angst"

I am sorry about the late post this week! I was so insanely busy last week, including with Lunar New Year! (恭喜發財! Gongxi facai!) It's the Year of the Dragon now!

My prime time for making edits to this story and posting it was stolen by wonderful cultural celebrations. Aiya! There isn't a big Chinese New Year celebration in my city, but there's an amazing Tết one at a local Buddhist temple, so I took my kids there.

I expect the next chapter to arrive a bit over a week from now again (then resuming my Sunday posting schedule), because I'm about to spend four days on a trip with my kids, and I'm not going to take my laptop with me at all. I'm sorry you'll have to wait a bit longer than usual. :/ But hopefully the length of this chapter helps make this news go down easier.

Speaking of LNY, yes, that is the same 恭喜發財 that young Marinette is screaming at patrons in Sabine's memory, except Marinette is saying it in Shanghainese and not being exactly perfect. That'd be *konshi faqze*!

My family used to speak a regional dialect of German that is nearly extinct now because the language wasn't passed on. I speak German with my kids to preserve the language in the family, but it's not my family's heritage dialect, and I'm the *only* one around them who speaks German. This makes me sad, so maybe I was channeling this frustration and sadness into Sabine as I wrote that little memory of young Marinette speaking Sabine's mother tongue.

Again, thank you sooooooooooooo so sso so so so sos os os o SO much to UpTooLateArt and RaspberryCatapult for all their work helping me bring you this story. Their input REALLY helped get this chapter more true to life.

Ill Omens

Chapter Summary

She said a silent prayer to anyone who was listening that she wouldn't see Marinette be victimized, wondering if this paralyzing dread was why her mother had been so severe, if the unflappable Meifen had really been scared all along, and whether she and Marinette were on the same path to destruction.

Marinette runs away during an akuma attack, Sabine worries she and Marinette are on a path to destruction, and memories of a family dinner with Uncle and her own mother.

Chapter Notes

Translation note:

bœuf bourguignon dont elle en avait discuté avec son tuteur du français - Beef bourguignon that she had talked about with her French tutor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sabine stretched as she and Marinette walked outside the Mandarin Oriental and into the sun, trying to play off the recent turmoil and give her daughter a chance to open up without any pressure. "Ahhh, I don't know about you, but I really needed to get out of the house."

"Yeah…" Marinette wasn't paying attention, instead fumbling with her phone.

"Marinette, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah…nice to get out…"

Sabine huffed and lunged toward Marinette, yanking the phone out of her hands.

"Hey!" shrieked her daughter, grasping to get the phone back.

"Marinette, I'm trying to talk to you and you're back in your little phone world again. *Take a break*. Look, I don't even have mine on. It's wonderful to be disconnected! Right now, there could be—"

Marinette's phone started wailing. She jumped for Sabine's arm, which was stretched out, still holding her phone. Sabine jumped back. "Ah ah ah! Not until we get—"

"*Maman*, give it here! I think there's an akuma attack!"

“Well, I don’t see one, so we’re safe. Stop fretting about akumas that are happening on the other side of the city. They never travel that—oof!”

Marinette had shoved Sabine, knocking her off balance. As Sabine fell on her butt, Marinette wrenched the phone back out of her grasp.

“Hey!” Sabine stood up and brushed her butt off only to notice Marinette wasn’t next to her anymore. “Marinette?!”

“Sorry, I’ve got to go! To the bathroom! Real bad!” she heard her daughter yell as she ran away.

She sprinted after her daughter. “What? Young lady, there’s an akuma attack, and we just left a spa with a *really* swanky bathroom!” She rounded the corner into an alley—Marinette was gone.

Angry at her for running away, Sabine threw her purse at the nearest wall. It landed, as her heart did, with a hollow thud. She felt ashamed that her first reaction was anger. But mostly she was terrified that something would happen to Marinette.

She ran around, looking down every side street, behind every dumpster, and over construction barriers into cordoned-off areas, but it was no use. Like when she tried to peer beyond the emotional walls her daughter erected daily, Marinette was lost to her.

The wail of sirens grew louder as the sky grew darker, but Sabine wasn’t sure if it was the adrenaline subsiding or an unnatural solar phenomenon that made it harder to see. She ducked under an awning and pressed herself against the wall, fighting to slow her breathing.

What was going on with her daughter? Running toward an akuma was unbelievable. She knew Marinette had helped in the past, but she couldn’t possibly believe it was safe to fight as a civilian, especially without coordinating with Ladybug or Chat Noir ahead of time! It was a death wish. But Marinette had such faith in Ladybug…

Maybe since she’d teamed up with her in the past, she expected the heroine to save the day and reverse the damage.

I don’t think *she’s trying to die…*

Had her daughter become an adrenaline junkie? Did she enjoy pain? These ideas didn’t make sense. But nothing made sense anymore. And it was agony to not be *certain* that Marinette wasn’t doing this to harm herself.

When Sabine had first heard of children cutting themselves, she was horrified and confused. What would motivate a child to do that? Weren’t people wired to *avoid* pain?

But because Sabine had sworn she’d be ready for anything as a parent, she read up on it. She learned that traumatized children often use physical pain to distract themselves from psychological pain.

And, bruises aside, Marinette was in great psychological pain.

She pinched her nose bridge, feeling a headache coming on, and fumbled with her phone to call Tom. She squatted down to rest on her heels after noticing her thighs wobbling. Remembering her

conversation about Qilin, she was hit with a wave of self-consciousness about how *Chinese* she must look right now. She shot back up.

“Tom, Marinette ran away in the middle of an akuma attack!”

“She did what?”

“She just…ran! I’m worried she took off to find Alya and help her film things!”

She could hear Tom breathing on the other end of the line, but he wasn’t immediately responding. “Tom?”

“I’m sure she’s fine. There are so many attacks at her school. She must know how to take care of herself.” It sounded more to her like he was trying to keep himself calm rather than her. “Stay calm, Sabine. Do some of your tai chi. You don’t want an akuma finding you in that state. If she’s lying to you…remember when you thought Marinette was lying before and Hawkmoth enticed you to become Verity Queen!”

“Okay…okay. You’re right.” She took a few shuddering breaths and knocked her fist on her thighs to help keep them from cramping. “I’ve got to go. I’m going to pull up the livestream.”

“Okay. Stay safe out there.”

“I will. I love you.”

She said a silent prayer to anyone who was listening that she wouldn’t see Marinette be victimized, wondering if this paralyzing dread was why her mother had been so severe, if the unflappable Meifen had really been scared all along, and whether she and Marinette were on the same path to destruction.

Shanghai.

Uncle Wang, Sabine, and her mother were finishing up a hotpot. It was one of the few days each year when her mother would come to stay overnight with her and Uncle, so Sabine worked extra hard to make her mother happy.

She lifted out the last of the sliced beef and presented it to her mother, who accepted the food, cleared her throat, and got right to the point: “Xiabing, you’ve been seeing French tutors long enough. Now that you’re sixteen—”

“Your mother and I have been discussing your future.” Uncle Wang spoke up, using his stature and timing, but not the volume of his voice, to take over the conversation as her mother inhaled to continue. Watching her try to re-create the tension as he defused it was like watching someone struggle to fight an empty jacket.

His warm voice—like the *bœuf bourguignon dont elle en avait discuté avec son tuteur du français*—was a stark contrast to her mother’s clipped, aggressive speech, which always left Sabine feeling like she was listening to a choppy radio broadcast. “You will begin traveling with me whenever I go to Paris for trade shows and training. Sometimes I will have you help me, but usually you will

be left to your own devices. We expect you to spend your time improving your French. Potential clients in the West generally treat us as outsiders, so it's important that you be as eloquent and your French as native-sounding as possible."

Sabine looked at him in surprise. She could almost taste the beef bourguignon she'd sample in Paris once there. "Of course, Uncle."

He smiled at her. "Though you already speak French better than I."

Her mother rolled her eyes. "What my brother-in-law is trying to say, with his sugar-coating ways, is that your French isn't great, but it needs to be. I don't want you going anywhere or doing anything that isn't helping him or improving your French. Unless it's something extra I tell you to do, like meeting with family business contacts."

"Yes, Mama."

"And I don't want you getting into trouble like you do here. You are Chinese, not French, and they won't let you forget it. We're pouring our resources into you, like we did with your cousin in Tokyo, for the honor of the family. I know it will be tempting while you're so close to the Louvre, but try not to waste your time looking at sculptures. There are more important things."

"Yes, Mama."

Meifen stood up. "I have an early morning flight to New York, so I won't be staying tonight."

Sabine was disappointed, but not surprised. Why did it hurt so much then? She gave a half-hearted response: "On my birthday?"

Meifen reached into her bag. "Here, a gift for you. Read it."

Sabine bowed her head. "Thank you, Mama."

She stood to walk her mother to the door of Wang's kitchen lab. Meifen carefully stepped around a few experimental soups, looking at each one with both disgust and disinterest—a combination only she could achieve.

Once again, Sabine felt like she was escorting one of the family's associates out the door, rather than spending time with her mother. Her mother had sent her to live with Uncle when she was so young. At the time, Sabine didn't understand why, but over a decade, she had come to realize it was a blessing. Even if it was so her mother could focus on raising her sister.

When they reached the edge of the garden, Meifen blocked Sabine and opened the door herself. Without even turning to say goodbye, she walked through the threshold of the moon gate. Over her shoulder, she lobbed a final threat: "No boys."

Sabine watched her mother slide gracefully into the family car before she closed the door and was zipped away by the driver.

Later in the afternoon, Sabine sat in her bedroom trying to distract herself with one of her C-dramas. But her treacherous eyes kept darting to the clock. One hour…two hours…two and a half hours…and nothing from Marinette. She looked out the window. The sun was setting. It was

unsettling to see it set twice in a few hours. Whatever light-stealing akuma the heroes had been fighting, it felt like it was stealing a little light from Sabine's soul as well.

She threw her remote at its cradle, swore, and got up to head to the kitchen. Maybe she could eat her feelings.

Twenty minutes later, her phone vibrated in her pocket while she and Tom were preparing dinner much earlier than usual. Marinette still wasn't home, so maybe it was her! Distracted and nervous, she cut her finger. "Ouch!"

"Are you okay?" Tom moved to help, but she waved him off with her good hand.

She tried to staunch the blood as she fumbled with tugging her phone out of her pocket, but it kept dribbling out of the cut.

She wiped her hand one last time on a tea towel to clean her finger before she looked down at the lock screen, a picture of Marinette holding the bowler hat she'd made. The screen was smeared with blood across her daughter's face.

Please let this not be an omen.

It was the school calling. She swiped to answer before wrapping her finger tightly in a tissue to let the platelets do their job. Something else red that healed wounds in this city.

"*Oui, allo*," she greeted.

"May I speak with Mme Cheng, please?"

"Speaking."

"Yes, this is Principal Damocles from Françoise Dupont. I'm afraid your daughter has been absent —"

"Oh, I know. But I called the school yesterday to let you know she wouldn't be there."

"No, Mme Cheng. I'm not talking about just today. This month, Marinette has had five unexcused absences from at least part of the day of school. This is not including tardies during akuma buffer times where we allow students to get re-situated after an attack."

Sabine sat down in the nearest chair, unsure whether it was the cut to her finger or her pride that left her feeling dizzy. "Five absences? But I've only taken her out this once!"

Tom looked at her with confusion. "Marinette?" he mouthed at her. She nodded.

Damocles continued lecturing her. "Well, then I would speak with your daughter to find out if she has any *good* reason for having missed so much school. Here at Françoise Dupont we pride ourselves on academic excellence—"

"Is she not doing well in school?" Sabine heard a keyboard clacking through the phone.

"Well, umm, she *is* doing fine in school. Sufficient in some classes, outstanding in art and literature. But that's not the point. As you may be aware, France imposes a 135 euro fine upon parents who

cannot justify their child's absence from school, and if her grades were to suffer, you and your husband could face a larger fine and imprisonment."

"Imprisonment? For some *absences*?"

At this, Tom's eyes bugged out. He left the food right before he prepared the *beurre monté* and approached her, rubbing circles along her back, likely more to reassure himself than her.

"Mme Cheng, that is what the Civil Code provides for."

"OK, then…there must be something we can do. Is there schoolwork for her to make up?"

"I suggest you speak with your daughter and get her set straight. You don't want her to end up *expelled*, do you?"

Sabine clenched her jaw and counted from five before speaking again, remembering the last time she'd spoken to the principal. When he'd expelled Marinette after that girl lied about Marinette trying to hurt her.

She had debased herself by not taking her daughter's word as truth that time, and she wasn't going to make that mistake again. She would give Marinette the benefit of the doubt and wait until she got home to ask her for her side of the story.

"And *you* wouldn't want the news to cover the story of a class representative being expelled without a formal investigation—*again*—would you? I'm old friends with Nadja Chamack, and she is quite fond of Marinette."

She heard Damocles huffing on the other end of the line. "Message received, Mme Cheng. It's just municipal policy for a school to call the parents of a truant teenager after five absences. I'm just the messenger. I advise you to look into this. Even if her grades are fine now, this is always how it starts. Good evening."

Stunned, Sabine lay her phone on the table.

Tom sat down next to her and put his hand on her thigh. "What was that about, honey? I haven't heard you threaten someone in a long time."

"That was Principal Damocles. He said Marinette has been missing school and that we could get in trouble for it!"

"What? Our little croissant is skipping?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions. She's probably got a reasonable explanation. I don't know what, though. And she did run away from me when she found out there was an akuma attack. Do you think it's gotten that bad for her living here in Paris?"

—THUMP—

They jumped at the sound.

Wide eyed, she looked at her husband. "I thought you said she wasn't home!"

But he looked just as surprised as her. “I’ve been here all day; I don’t know how she could have snuck up there without me noticing. She would’ve had to have been very quiet.”

“I’ll just go check.” Sabine walked upstairs and heard muffled talking coming from through the trap door. She pushed through.

Her daughter was pacing around the room, muttering to herself. Her phone wasn’t in sight, there wasn’t any streaming video playing, and she didn’t have a video game headset on. She didn’t know what Marinette was saying, but she imagined it was negative. She’d been covering up negative thoughts for days now.

“Marinette?”

Marinette nearly jumped out of her own skin. “*Maman*! Gah, you scared me!”

“What are you doing here?”

Marinette stared at her mother with confusion. “What do you mean, what am I doing here? This is my room.”

Sabine gritted her teeth, wishing she had something in hand to throw across the room alongside her frustration. Her daughter didn’t seem to understand how terrified she left her all day. Marinette’s casual disregard of her feelings reminded Sabine of how her own mother used to be, and she just couldn’t let *Marinette* turn into *Mama*.

“Marinette! You ran off when you found out there was an akuma! And I haven’t seen you for *hours*! Your father said you never came home, and I’ve been downstairs worried *sick* wondering if you’d gotten hurt—”

“Ladybug always makes things better—”

“Akumas aren’t the only dangerous thing out there!” Sabine began enumerating with her fingers. “First you disappear, then you never text, you sneak back into the house to avoid a scolding, then your school calls to tell me you’ve been *playing hooky*! What has gotten into you? Are you trying to ruin your life? Do you *want* to get hurt? I’m sick of this, Marinette! You’re grounded until further notice!”

Her daughter gaped at her. They had never grounded Marinette for anything before. She was a model child, obedient in all the important ways, but without the cloying pantomime of obsequiousness that marked children as annoying. She was going to do great things one day.

But today, she was going to be shuffled back under Sabine’s wing and chained there until something changed.

Marinette spluttered, certainly taken by surprise. “What? But I have to meet with Clara to take her measurements for a commission! And I have my internship!” She stomped her foot, and Sabine’s own leg remembered the jolt of pain from when her own mother used to drive her to physical, cowering protest. “Y-You can’t do this to me! My future!”

“Oh, so *now* you care about your future? What about when you chased after an akuma earlier? What about what your teachers think of you?” Sabine threw her arms out wide. “Their opinions of you matter, too! Mlle Bustier is active in the SNES. A phone call from her could make such a

difference when you're trying to get into uni! That's the type of connection you need to—ugh! I don't know where I've gone wrong with you! If I'd have *ever* stepped out of line like this, my mother would've—"

Sabine caught her breath and felt a tension in her neck. She took a deep breath and let it out.

Now isn't the time.

"You can still go to the internship. As for Clara, you should have thought of that before acting out! Have her come here, I don't care. But you are *not* to leave this house except for school and your internship, do you hear me?"

Marinette set her jaw and looked at Sabine defiantly.

"I said *do you hear me*?"

"…yes…"

"What? I didn't hear you."

"I SAID YES, OKAY? GEEZ!"

Sabine growled and stomped down through the trapdoor.

As she left, she heard Marinette stomp up her own ladder to the bed and then out to the rooftop balcony, slamming the trapdoor closed behind her.

Sabine had to give it to her, Marinette knew how to dedicate herself to performative anger.

Chapter End Notes

First off, there is a TV Tropes page about this fic. Holy hell, dudes, that's crazy! I remember sooo long ago when this website was just about TV and movies (and maybe books). I feel old now! Thank you so much to Lord-Jaric for creating this. ACK!!!

I've modeled Sabine's family on the Rothschild family history. It's really interesting! The Rothschild patriarch centuries ago sent his five sons to five different European cities to establish businesses, and together they created a powerful banking empire. I have linked them because I always thought it was interesting that in canon we have Sabine's sister in London, Sabine in Paris, and Sabine's family in Shanghai. These are three global financial centers. It's the kind of thing I didn't want to assume was coincidence!

And yes, that fine and jail thing about truancy is true! I looked it up. And "SNES" is a teacher's union in France. Honestly, I don't know if the power I gave Mlle Bustier actually exists, but I like to imagine that the teacher who becomes (a super effective!) mayor in canon might previously have been well-connected in organized labor, and thus might be able to "make a call" for a beloved student.

Thank you again to UpTooLateArt and RaspberryCatapult for all your help. How did I get so lucky?

Oh, and if you want angst, RaspberryCatapult has a new story out that I got hints of for soooo long, and I can't believe it's here now! MIND THE TAGS!

Calligraphy and Coffee

Chapter Summary

The waiter brought a bottle of wine and two glasses, then served each of them. Nathalie thanked the waiter and looked again at Sabine. “You said you had something you wanted to discuss regarding our intern.”

Sabine began curling her toes inside her shoes, trying not to blurt out her concerns. “Yes. Um, I’m not sure how to approach this, but…is Marinette with you the entire time at her internship?”

“Yes, her primary duty is to shadow me, to perform tasks that I deem an inefficient use of my time. Plus, of course, she’s a preternatural talent, and we want to cultivate a positive relationship with her. So she will get a little more exposure to the creative side than if she were a typical assistant’s assistant.”

“Wow. Thank you for that. I can’t tell you how much Tom and I appreciate you.” Sabine swirled the wine in her glass, watching the red dance in the light as it clung to the inside of the glass, black bits of sediment tumbling before sinking back down. “And when she does these tasks for you, you don’t stay with her…right?”

“That is correct.”

“And…do you know if she’d ever be put in contact with an adult...unsupervised?”

Chapter Notes

This one is for Kasienda.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first day of Marinette’s grounding started off smoothly enough. Her daughter gave her a kiss on the cheek as she skipped out the door to meet Alya. Once Sabine had seen them far enough from the house, she turned back inside the bakery.

“Tom, can you watch the counter for a bit? I’m going to run upstairs real quick.”

“Sure, Honey.”

Now’s my chance.

Sabine marched up the stairs, determined to figure out what was going on with her daughter. But the closer she got to Marinette’s room, the slower she took each step, as if her muscles were wasting away. Her heart was pounding.

Am I going to find a clue? Am I going to be able to help Marinette?

Please don't let her secret be what I think it is...

She put her hand on the trapdoor and pushed it open, inching into the room like a mouse peeking out of its den, afraid a single creak would attract attention. Closing the trapdoor behind her, she glanced furtively around the room, not knowing what she was actually looking for. She almost laughed at the idea that Marinette might have set traps to protect herself, but she caught herself, realizing the implication that it would mean her daughter was afraid in her own fourth-floor room.

The chaise. Check under the chaise.

Kids hide things under sofas all the time!

She knelt down and slid her hands under Marinette's chaise longue, but she palmed air.

There's…nothing under here at all. Good job for keeping at least one place in your room clean, sweetie!

So what next?

Still kneeling, she scanned the room. Her eyes eventually climbed the ladder and fell on the loft bed.

Bingo.

She climbed up to the bed. There were fabric swatches scattered across the duvet, but nothing about it looked any different than it had since they'd given Marinette that starter kit for sewing years ago. She smiled, remembering young Socqueline running around the counter at the nearby crafting store owned by Jeannette, grabbing their hands and dragging them to the right aisle.

"If she's anything like me, she'll love this."

Those were simpler times, back then. They'd drop in and Marinette would gush to her friend about a recent project, and Socqueline would shout out updates to Sabine of her taekwondo progress, knowing she was talking to a fellow martial artist. If only Marinette had shared that interest with her, too.

From Sabine's vantage point atop Marinette's bed, she surveyed the whole room. She scanned the sleeping area and the ground to her left, seeing Marinette's small book collection, her vanity, and some stacked shoe boxes. Then she leaned back, gripping the railing for safety, and peered down around the steps where she stood. Her breath caught in her throat.

Her diary.

It lay open on her desk. Marinette wrote *everything* in it.

Sabine had once gushed about a necklace on a shopping trip with her daughter, and come her birthday nearly a year later, she'd unwrapped her gift to discover Marinette had remembered it. When she asked her how she'd remembered, her daughter had pointed to her diary across the room and smirked. "It's all in there." Then she'd pointed to her head, "Because I can't keep it all in here."

Sabine's heart rate quietly accelerated and her breaths became shallow as she climbed down from the loft. *No. Those are her private thoughts.*

She turned to the desk and walked toward it. She reached her hand out to touch the pages, seeing her own fingers tremble.

Do it.

No.

Yes.

Without paying much attention to the text, she observed the penmanship, a memory of her mother's words in her head.

"Xiabing, look at these strokes. There's no confidence to them! One would think you were a foreigner learning Chinese. I'm going to have a talk with your calligraphy tutor. This is embarrassing. There's no way I'm having you write out the banners for our fundraiser now!"

Marinette's strokes looked timid.

Sabine froze. *Timid? No! You're not your mother.*

She felt sick. She'd invaded Marinette's privacy so comfortably, and she'd immediately turned critical. It was Marinette's diary, after all—she could write as sloppy as she wanted.

Trust her.

Sabine took a step back from the diary just as Marinette's voice rang like an approaching police siren, muffled by the trap door. "I'll be back down in a sec, Alya. I can't believe I forgot my backpack!"

Sabine startled, frantically scanning the area. *I can't let her catch me in here!* But there was no hidey-hole to scurry into. An excuse would have to—

The trap door banged open.

"*Maman*! What are you doing?!"

She spun around to see Marinette crawling up into the room. She schooled her face not to betray her guilt. "Marinette! O-oh, good, you're back! I thought I had left my ring up here last night after your latest nightmare. I was hoping you'd found it but forgotten it on your desk."

Marinette stared at her, and then at Sabine's hand, then peered into her eyes like she was reading her mind. Then she ran over and scooped her diary up from her desk, closed it, and hugged it to her chest. "The ring…on your finger?"

"What?"

Caught.

Sabine looked down at her trembling fingers. She was a terrible liar. “Yes! Oh, haha! Silly me, it was right there the whole time! Oh, please don’t tell your father, he’ll tease me for days.”

“...right.” Marinette shifted from one foot to the other, seemingly unable to stay still.

Was it just the invasion of privacy that had her so anxious?

Marinette gulped loudly. She slapped her free hand over her mouth and laughed nervously. Then she spun around and rushed to her backpack by her desk, sliding the diary inside.

Sabine was proud of herself that in the end she hadn’t read anything. But at the same time…

She had been *so close*. If only her eyes had accidentally scanned a few pages.

No. This isn’t the way to get that knowledge. I can’t lose my daughter’s trust.

Sabine walked to the trapdoor and stepped through to the ladder. As she took the rungs one at a time, she ran her hand along the railing, feeling the wood grain beneath her fingers.

She paused, looking up.

“Marinette? You know I love you very much, right?”

“Of course!”

“And you don’t think I’m too hard on you?”

Marinette tilted her head and looked down at her, her eyes revealing confusion and concern. “No, not at all! *Maman*, is there something wrong?“

Straining to smile, Sabine ducked her head to hide her face. She inspected the ladder like she needed to pay attention while she descended, as if she hadn’t been doing this every day for years.

“No, nothing’s wrong. It’s just…sometimes parents want what’s best for their kids but don’t know if they’re doing the right thing.”

For a moment, the room was quiet and nobody moved. Sabine could hear the sounds of traffic and commerce outside.

Then her daughter shuffled toward the hatch and slid a hand over hers. Sabine looked up, and there was Marinette, crouched low, moving her forehead in to touch hers—*Why did we ever stop doing this?*—smiling broadly.

Marinette’s tender reassurances came confidently out of her mouth. “I’m so happy you’re my mother. Don’t worry about a thing; I’m not going anywhere.”

Her phone tolled with incoming messages, probably from Alya. “Ahhh!!! Except to school! Because I’m late! And grounded! Move, *Maman!*”

Sabine smiled and shuffled down the ladder, making room for Marinette to dart past. “Good luck at school today, honey!” Her hand brushed her daughter’s arm as she passed, and it felt like she was

slipping away.

The heat of her shame melted the smile off her face. She made a beeline for the master bedroom, locking the door behind her. She turned on her white noise machine, sat down on the edge of the bed, and cried.

Get it together. She's so *much better than you.*

Close to noon, Sabine found herself anxious again, wondering how many calories she'd burned just tapping her foot. She pulled the cash out of the till and counted and re-counted it.

She had *just* vowed to trust Marinette. She *promised* herself.

But she could already feel that determination eroding. Was it a good idea to trust Marinette with so much at stake? Her life might be on the line! Her health. Her integrity. Her future.

Children don't know what's best. Parents do.

"Tom, can you watch the till for a few minutes?" she called out.

He popped his head into the storefront from wherever he'd been hiding, the tinny in-fight music from UMS Mini clinking and plinking from his phone. "Absolutely, honey. What do you need to do?"

"You know the woman who works for Gabriel Agreste, Nathalie Sancoeur? She gave me her number when Marinette started her internship, and—"

"Sabine." He scratched his forehead. "We read stories about parents like this years ago. Do you really want to be that mom who calls her daughter's boss?"

Sabine shook her head. "This is different. I'm not calling to give her a piece of my mind about anything. I'm hoping I can feel her out, suss out whether she's seen Gabriel do anything inappropriate around Marinette."

She smiled at her own plan. "Besides, Nathalie *gave* me her number. It's not the same. Marinette isn't an *adult* child at a *real* job after college. She's just a kid."

Sabine nodded to herself at that, feeling reassured that she did get to keep Marinette under lock and key if she wanted. "Nathalie is her boss, sure, but she's also a bit like a parent. Like Mlle Bustier at the school. *In loco parentis*—that's the term, right? She'll understand." She felt humor bubble up from the tar pit her heart had become the past few days. "I know she's cold, but it's not like she's a *villain*."

Tom sighed in resignation. "Okay, Sabine. But remember, reading her is like reading the phone book. All facts, no feelings. If you think you can handle her, I trust you."

She winced, thinking of Marinette's diary. It wasn't Tom's fault he didn't know how much those three words hurt to hear right now.

She walked out of the bakery to the storeroom where it would be quietest.

I don't think I have a choice, Tom.

Pulling out her phone, she dialed the number Nathalie had given her. The phone had only rung once when the line connected.

"Mme Cheng. To what do I owe the pleasure?" came the crisp voice of Gabriel's assistant, sounding disinterested and attentive in equal measure.

Sabine made her voice as amiable as she could. "Mlle Sancoeur, I need to talk to you about my daughter. I think something's going on in her life, and since you're around her for a few hours a week, I was hoping to talk to you about anything you might have seen."

Nathalie hummed. "I'm afraid I'm rather busy at the moment." Sabine imagined Nathalie multitasking with two tablets for work plus a hands-free device for their call.

"It doesn't need to be right now, and of course I can meet you anywhere at your convenience. It would mean the world to me."

Nathalie hummed longer and louder. "Regardless, I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary with Mlle Dupain-Cheng. She's been an exemplary intern."

Sabine tutted. "Still, you wouldn't begrudge a mother some peace of mind, would you? I've noticed you around Adrien. I can't help but feel like you understand how important this is to me."

Never take no for an answer.

Nathalie sighed on the line like a leaking air canister, and Sabine marveled at the woman's impressive lung capacity. But screw being an imposition when one's child is in trouble.

"Very well. If it suits you, I will have some time at six this evening. Mr Agreste has an important meeting, and I will be across town handling some other items for him. I can sit down with you at Café de Flore. I will text you the address."

"Oh, I know where it is."

Nathalie sounded embarrassed. "Ah, I didn't mean to imply—"

"I inferred nothing. Thank you, Mlle Sancoeur. I will see you then. I really appreciate it."

"Hm."

The call cut out. Sabine didn't think she'd ever get used to that strange woman.

But she let Marinette shadow her, so she can't be all bad.

[ping]

Sabine checked her phone as a calendar invite from Nathalie showed up in her notification list.

Well, Nathalie, I'll see you at six.

At six on the dot, Sabine walked into the café wearing an attention-grabbing black *zansae* with gold and red embroidery. She knew Nathalie didn't design for *Gabriel*, but it was a small opportunity to catch the eye of a member of his inner circle. Nathalie might say something to Gabriel, Gabriel might decide to investigate Chinese fashion, and—oh, goodness me—they just happened to have an intern who is half-Chinese… Seize every opportunity. She'd learned that from Uncle.

Tom knew what she was up to, but she'd told Marinette she was meeting up with a calligraphy student and asked her if she wanted to go. At the mention of "calligraphy," her daughter had spluttered and reminded her that she'd been grounded and wasn't going to let Sabine "trick me into breaking the rules."

Marinette had sighed dramatically, placed the back of her hand to her forehead, and moaned about how sad she was to be missing out on calligraphy and coffee.

Get this girl a prix d'interprétation féminine *from Cannes*.

In the café, Nathalie was already seated at a table, dressed in a crisp pantsuit. Despite it being the end of the day, her clothes looked like she'd just had them starched. There didn't seem to be any wrinkles. It was like the *fabric* didn't want to disappoint her.

Nathalie looked up from her tablet, undoubtedly dealing with demands from Gabriel, and abruptly stood to greet her, extending for *une bise*.

"Mme Cheng—"

"Please, call me Sabine."

Nathalie's mask of professionalism remained. "Very well, Sabine. Please, sit. I've already instructed the waiter to bring us drinks once he sees two at our table. You seem like a Barolo woman."

How in the hell? "Thank you, Mlle—"

"Nathalie. I will pay you the same courtesy."

Sabine felt wind in her sails for the first time since before the spa trip. If Nathalie brought this level of zeal to a chat, she must be aware of *anything* untoward happening at Gabriel.

"Your qipao is beautiful."

Sabine feigned shyness. "Oh, this old thing?"

The waiter brought a bottle of wine and two glasses, then served each of them. Nathalie thanked the waiter and looked again at Sabine. "You said you had something you wanted to discuss regarding our intern."

Sabine began curling her toes inside her shoes, trying not to blurt out her concerns. "Yes. Um, I'm not sure how to approach this, but…is Marinette with you the entire time at her internship?"

"Yes, her primary duty is to shadow me, to perform tasks that I deem an inefficient use of my time. Plus, of course, she's a preternatural talent, and we want to cultivate a positive relationship with her. So she will get a little more exposure to the creative side than if she were a typical assistant's assistant."

“Wow. Thank you for that. I can’t tell you how much Tom and I appreciate you.” Sabine swirled the wine in her glass, watching the red dance in the light as it clung to the inside of the glass, black bits of sediment tumbling before sinking back down. “And when she does these tasks for you, you don’t stay with her…right?”

“That is correct.”

“And…do you know if she’d ever be put in contact with an adult...unsupervised?”

Nathalie raised an eyebrow. “Unsupervised by me?”

Sabine hesitated. “No. I mean...when you send her to do things, is it possible she’d end up alone with one adult, no one else around?”

“...I suppose so. Although it’s unlikely. Work moves at a brisk pace at *Gabriel*, and it’s almost unheard of for someone to be alone—besides Gabriel, of course. They’ll be in meetings, or sharing a design space on a floor with few private offices. Even if I sent her to make copies or retrieve swatches to deliver to a designer, it’s unlikely she’d be alone in the—“ Nathalie cut herself off and squinted at Sabine, her attention like a lens focusing a beam of light to a white hot point. “Actually, can I ask why you’re curious? Did Marinette tell you something happened to her?”

Sabine squirmed, knowing this was the Rubicon. “No. Well, not in so many words.”

“Then how did she—“

“She didn’t say anything. It’s her behavior.” Sabine couldn’t hold it in any longer. She had closed herself off from anyone not immediate family during this crisis, and her worries were like a dog bursting out the front door when it sees a friendly stranger.

“A few nights ago, Marinette woke up from a nightmare screaming about someone touching her. But she won’t talk about it. And then a few days ago, she got freaked out by someone dressed like Dark Cupid beside an advertisement invoking ‘sin.’ I’ve seen her jerk back from being touched, too. I’ve got a bad feeling that someone’s behaved inappropriately with her, and I can’t for the life of me figure out when it might have happened.

“I’ve wanted to talk to some other parents, but our group chats from when the kids were young are all graveyards. I’m kind of hoping it’s just an akuma thing. It’s hard enough being an adult in Paris right now; I can’t imagine what it’s like to have your childhood traumatized by Hawkmoth.”

Nathalie looked at her with interest, resting her chin on her hand and leaning forward. “Go on.”

“You’d think if something were going on, we all would have noticed and resurrected a group chat. But…” She nodded toward her phone. “…nothing. And her friend—you know Alya Césaire, right?”

“Yes, she is one of Adrien’s friends.”

“Well, she seems to know something. But she won’t talk to me, either. I tried talking to Adrien—“

“What? When did you talk to him?”

For the briefest of moments, Sabine felt like a heat lamp had been turned in her direction, such was the fervor in Nathalie’s question. But the sensation was gone as soon as she registered it, and

Nathalie was again sitting before her like it was a job interview. “Oh, he came by the bakery after he heard what had happened to Marinette. He’s such a sweet boy.”

Nathalie’s lip twitched at the corner before returning to its normal resting state. “Yes, he is.”

“You know, Nathalie, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you had a hand in that.”

Nathalie looked equal parts wistful and ashamed. “No. I’m sorry to say I haven’t contributed to his kindness. I am not a warm person, and I serve his father too closely to be able to support Adrien’s emotional needs. It’s miraculous that he’s turned out the way he has. His father is...restrained in his emotions and believes that too much affection makes a child weak.”

“...I see.” Sabine took a long drink of her wine. “Actually, now that you mention Mr Agreste, I was curious how Marinette has interacted with him. Does she seem nervous? Confident? Quiet? Has her behavior around him changed during the internship?”

Nathalie eyed Sabine. “If you’re trying to figure out if Gabriel took advantage of her, I can assure you that is impossible. He is many things, Sabine, but he’s not a monster. Marinette would never have been left alone with him. He has no patience for interns, and I would not allow her into his office unaccompanied, either. Any powerful executive knows never to be alone in a room with a younger employee because of this exact scenario; it’s a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

Sabine shifted uncomfortably in her seat, feeling called out for her unspoken accusation. But Nathalie had handled it with grace despite knowing this was the type of thing that could ruin a reputation forever. “Okay. So never alone with Gabriel, unlikely alone with anyone else. Marinette joked that almost all the men working at the company are gay anyway...”

Nathalie laughed, and it rang rich and clean, like the first time one tried out a new set of earbuds. “That is true.”

Who knew Nathalie Sancoeur followed pop culture?

The woman, having apparently exhausted her joy reserves with one laugh, looked at Sabine seriously. “Actually, you mentioned you talked to Adrien. Did he...share any of how he’s been feeling lately? I’ve noticed him acting strange occasionally, but I haven’t identified any abnormal patterns, just a feeling I get. And I am not known for having feelings very often.“

Sabine wasn’t sure whether that was a joke. “Well, I don’t want to betray his confidence—”

“*Please*.” Nathalie leaned over and put her hand on hers, a sudden look of ferality surprising Sabine. “Adrien is very important to me. I was close with his mother, and after she...departed, I took it upon myself to be, at the very least, a bit of a watchdog. I don’t get involved—not like a mother, anyway—but I do want him to be safe and happy. If he told you anything important...”

“Well, not really.” Some of the tension left her body. If the hyper-professional Nathalie Sancoeur was willing to be this vulnerable with her, then she’d made the right choice by reaching out. “He seemed to understand panic attacks well enough...”

“Panic attacks?”

Sabine nodded. “Marinette had that panic attack, you see, and Alya knew what to do to help her resurface. And when Adrien came over, he was so tender with Marinette that I think he must

understand, too. I wouldn't be surprised if he's seen this happen to my daughter before and learned on his own what he should do to help her."

Nathalie's eyes glistened, as if the boy were there, giving her permission to feel. "Yes, that does sound like my Adrien," she whispered, as soft as the rustling of feathers. "Sabine, you said Marinette seemed to be triggered by someone dressed like an akuma?"

"Yes."

"Hm. The other day Adrien was meandering around a photo shoot during his downtime with a listless look in his eyes. I asked him about it, but he reassured me that he was just lost in thought. But now that you mention it, he has been increasingly agitated around pigeons, and we were doing another photo shoot with them." Nathalie huffed and frowned. "I don't know why Gabriel is so insistent on the bird since he knows Adrien is allergic to feathers. And you'd think after all the Mister Pigeon attacks, they'd be reviled."

"He didn't take a Rhinallergy before the shoot?"

"He is supposed to, but he has his mind on other things, so he often forgets. Gabriel used to outright forbid it, though, because it can cause water retention, and since Adrien's a model..."

Sabine hummed in response. Opening her mouth risked the escape of a biting comment.

Nathalie continued. "But I wasn't really thinking about the allergy. I was thinking that Adrien was steering clear of the pigeons as much as he could. I wonder if it's Mr Ramier's repeated akumatizations."

"Maybe." Sabine slid one of her hands into her lap and began tapping her knee. "You know, Nathalie, I was thinking about how many kids Ladybug has recruited as temporary holders. Kim, Alya, Nino, and Max all in Adrien's class, plus Luka Couffaine—if you know him."

Nathalie looked shocked. "How do you know about them?"

"The same way I imagine *you* do." Unsure why Nathalie looked nervous all of a sudden, Sabine grimaced. "*Chloé Bourgeois* has been so loud about their shortcomings as temporary superheroes.

"Can you imagine if Ladybug ever recruited Adrien? How would you even *know*? He might be out there at night, sneaking around fighting villains. What would you do if it had been him dressed as that turtle guy? It's awful how all our children are being affected by Hawkmoth. They're going to live with this trauma their entire lives."

Nathalie pursed her lips. "I really hope not. If I had one wish, it would be to make everyone forget Hawkmoth had ever happened." Her phone chimed, and she glanced at it. "I'm afraid I need to get going."

"Oh! Okay."

"But I promise you I will keep an eye on your daughter at work. I'm in and out of the artist spaces enough that I can keep a closer watch. They're such flighty things, sometimes you have to breathe down their necks to get anything done."

"Don't I know it," Sabine said, rolling her eyes.

“I will make sure there’s no way she’s *ever* alone with someone.” Nathalie smiled and stood up. “I admit it was a mistake on my part not to keep a closer eye on her, since she’s so young. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

Nathalie took a few steps, paused, and turned back to Sabine, placing her hand on the table. “I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, but I think Adrien likes Marinette a lot more than he realizes. That makes her all the more important to me.” She looked left and right before leaning in conspiratorially. “I prefer this state of things over his obsession with Ladybug. He has a shrine in his closet he thinks I don’t know about. Maybe he’ll take it down for your daughter’s sake.”

Sabine laughed. “Well, then I’ll tell you a secret back: she used to have an entire wall of pictures of him from ads. Actually, I guess it’s not a secret since it was featured on national TV!”

Nathalie smiled. “We should scheme.”

Sabine was excited at the thought of this unexpected new girlfriend. “I’d like that, Nathalie.”

“Have a nice evening. Good luck with Marinette.”

“Thank you. And you, too. Let me know if she gives you any trouble. She’s had some unexplained absences from school.”

Nathalie’s stride hitched, she looked deep in thought for a moment, and then she marched out of the café.

Hm, that was odd.

On the walk home, Sabine received a text from Nathalie.

Nathalie Sancoeur

Here is the number of a good therapist. Adrien saw him after his mother died. 🦚

Sorry. I meant 👩💼

Sabine had already set up an appointment for Marinette before she got home.

Chapter End Notes

This was the first scene that really got away from me. Plotting the story, I had a placeholder chapter name, “Sabine Investigates.” I filled it in with a couple people she needs to talk to, plus checking Marinette’s room again. I asked myself who she should talk to, and on a whim I started writing a talk with Nathalie. It grew to about 2K words long before I was done. I thought for a while that my beta readers would tell me it didn’t advance the plot, or felt wrong

for the story, and to remove it. I think it was just my pessimism, because I LOVED writing Nathalie and was so attached to this interlude.

And then the scene grew another 50%, and currently stands at around 3100 words.

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You might have noticed Sabine putting on a zansae but Nathalie calls it a qipao. They are the same thing!

There are three words I know for this style of clothing:

1. qipao (the Mandarin word)
2. cheongsam (the Cantonese word)
3. zansae or zan-se (the Shanghainese term)

“Cheongsam” and “zansae” are written the same, but are pronounced differently in the same way, say, “been” (Dutch, “leg”) and “Bein” (German, “leg”) are, but they’re obviously from the same origin.

“Qipao” OTOH is written differently (so, like “leg” in English, a language related to German and Dutch but using a totally different word for the same body part; also, if you’re curious, “bone” in English is cognate with the Dutch/German been/Bein because LINGUISTIC CHANGE IS INEVITABLE).

The characters for qipao mean “Manchu gown,” while “cheongsam”/“zansae” is “long robe.” (Manchu is one of the ethnic groups in China; for connections in the English language, see, e.g. “Fu Manchu” and “Manchuria”.) China was dominated by the Han ethnic group for a long time, and the Manchus were assimilated over time (they also took over China; the Han Ming dynasty ended and was followed by the Manchurian Qing dynasty).

My thinking is that Nathalie would use “qipao” because she’s a Westerner and most likely familiar with Mandarin (maybe she’s even learned it!).

OTOH, Sabine is from Shanghai and to me she would be native in Shanghainese and Mandarin. In early versions of this story, I considered having Sabine only speak Mandarin, having rejected Shanghainese culture as a way of distancing herself from her past. In that case, I wouldn’t have made this “zansae” choice! Instead, I decided that was a bridge too far, and I wanted an excuse to make myself learn more about Shanghainese culture rather than “she abandoned it” being a crutch for me to rely on my Mandarin experience and lack of knowledge about Shanghai.

Did you know that the qipao comes from Shanghai? It’s evolved over the years, but you can think of it as THE sexy clothes to wear in 1920s Shanghai. A total rejection of billowy, loose, traditional clothing, it was an icon of female liberation with its curve-hugging design like the flapper dress of the West at the same time in its motivation! (I have to confess, friends, the thought of martial arts kick ass Sabine in her 20s rocking a qipao? Tom must have been like Chat Noir is around Ladybug. No wonder she married him in a white gown; my boy wouldn’t have been able to STAND if she showed up in a red qipao)

I wanted to establish that clothing has been important to the family (a draft of last week’s chapter had young Sabine longing for a pink lambswool coat from Chanel).

When we first meet Sabine's mom, Sabine notices immediately her mother's clothes and wonders if the choice was meant to send her a message. Now we see Sabine making sartorial choices with intentionality. And of course Marinette is into fashion.

It's actually strange to write Sabine being afraid to look at her diary. When I grew up, I had no notions that I deserved that kind of privacy. I wrote some dirty songs in elementary school and kept them in a secret binder. My parents read them one day and I got in trouble. So instinctively I don't have a problem with Sabine reading Marinette's diary.

But EVERYONE I've ever talked to in the fandom thinks a parent reading their child's diary would be a huge invasion of privacy. So I choose to believe them and discern that my parents behaved wrongly.

It's forcing me to re-evaluate how I'll be when my kids are older. I think I'd be willing to spy already if I were in Sabine's shoes. Parenting is complicated work, and Sabine's comment about parents not always knowing the right thing to do is SO TRUE.

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